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## **THE CONTINUING QUEST FOR CHRISTIAN UNITY**

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**Edited by  
Kuncheria Pathil**

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A JOURNAL FOR SOCIO-RELIGIOUS RESEARCH

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## The Continuing Quest for Christian Unity

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## Editorial

The Ecumenical Movement was an extraordinary event and phenomenon of the 20<sup>th</sup> century with the historical landmark of *Edinburgh Missionary Conference* of 1910. It was a positive response on the part of the divided Churches to the prayer of Jesus for the unity of his disciples (Jn.17: 9-19). The three great ecumenical movements, *Missionary Movement*, *Life and Work Movement*, and *Faith and Order Movement* gradually merged into one movement which is represented today by the *World Council of Churches*. Although the Roman Catholic Church was in the beginning reluctant to join the ecumenical movement, with the Second Vatican Council the Catholic Church also joined the movement in its own way. Vatican II, in fact, gave a momentum to the Ecumenical Movement with the call to renewal and unity in the Church in all the areas of its life and mission.

After almost one hundred years of life in the ecumenical movement, where do the Churches stand today? How far the ecumenical movement really affected and changed the life and work of the Churches? Are the Churches really aware that they are bound up together as one movement for the sake of its mission in the world? Paradoxically however there is an apathy and indifference to the ecumenical movement on the part of all the Churches and even opposition to it on the part of some Churches. The current number of *Jeevadhara* examines the present ecumenical scenario and tries to make a balance sheet of the strength, weakness, opportunities and threats of the Ecumenical Movement.

In the first article the editor reexamines the history of the divisions that happened in the Church. The early centuries of Christianity witnessed a wide spectrum of tensions, conflicts and controversies

as Christianity emerged from its original Hebrew world, religion and culture. Understanding the mystery of the person and work of Christ differed from people to people and several communities were in conflict with each other on this doctrinal issue. Thus the so-called Nestorian and Monophysite Churches had to part company from the main stream of Christianity in the Roman Empire. Today we realize more and more that the mystery of Christ cannot be fully comprehended and cannot be clearly articulated in one language or cultural categories. Besides, Western and Eastern Christianities went into two different directions already with the division of the Roman Empire into West and East in the 4<sup>th</sup> century. Rivalries and controversies between Rome and Constantinople reached their climax in the 11<sup>th</sup> century and it led to mutual condemnations and the underlying reasons were more of political, social and cultural rather than doctrinal. The Protestant Reformation and the subsequent divisions in the Western Christianity were partly doctrinal and partly cultural and political. The article highlights the present ecumenical scenario and presents the contributions and the convergence created by the contemporary ecumenical movement.

K.C. Abraham introduces the "World Council of Churches", its contributions to the modern ecumenical movement and raises certain critical questions to WCC, its style and functioning today. Could the WCC move from its centre in Geneva to the periphery into the various continents that are entirely diverse in language, categories and culture? We have to make a radical shift from the traditionally Christocentric approach to a pluralistic approach and an ecological rather than an ecumenical approach. Dagmar Heller, a German theologian from the World Council Headquarters at Geneva, writes on the ecumenical consensus arrived at on the traditional doctrines of Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry today in the Faith and Order Movement. It is the result of more than fifty years of patient and open theological dialogues among the theologians and leaders of the different Churches. If this ecumenical process has to continue, it has to filter through the grass-root level of the ecumenical movement. No other option is left.

Representing the Oriental Orthodox Churches, K. M. George from India, examines and evaluates the present ecumenical relations

between them and the Roman Catholic Church. From animosity and rivalries we have moved to collaboration, mutual understanding and appreciation. Yet, we have to go a long way shedding mutual suspicion and the priority should be to build up communion with a rich diversity and mutual acceptance.

The vision of an ecumenical Church and the dream of one world and one humanity have to be always before us in spite of all the obstacles, difficulties and conflicts. It is God who beckons us to a new world fully human and fully divine, where there is justice, freedom, love and peace for all and safety and security for our planet Mother Earth.

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# Historical Divisions in the Church: A Fresh Look at the Old Issues

Kuncheria Pathil

Contemporary studies on New Testament and Early Christianity have clearly established that the early Christian communities were not homogeneous or uniform but marked with enormous diversity in the forms of ministries, patterns of organizations, expressions and formulations of faith and ways of worship arising from their different historical, political, social, cultural and religious contexts.<sup>1</sup> They were only very loosely linked with each other, and conflicts and tensions were also not entirely absent between the different local Churches. All the same the early Christians were fully conscious that Church is one, one fellowship, the communion of all the local Churches that they all share in the same faith in Jesus Christ in whom they are incorporated into one Body.

This original Christian vision of *unity in diversity* was lost to a great extent in the course of the Church's growth and development and, in fact, the historical divisions in the Church happened almost as a result of centralization and insistence on uniformity and the tendency to condemn all diversity in doctrinal and theological formulations. Ever since the identification of the Church with the Roman Empire in 4th century, uniformity of all the local Churches within the Empire in matters relating to doctrines, structures and organization was insisted

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1 James D. G. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament: An Inquiry into the Character of Earliest Christianity*, London: SCM, 1977.

upon, as it was felt necessary for the political stability of the Empire. All new ideas, developments and innovations were frowned upon, with the result of tragic divisions in Christianity.

### **Christological Controversies and Divisions in the 5<sup>th</sup> Century**

Ever since the beginning of Christianity its unity was threatened time and again by various heresies and schisms, many of which gradually disappeared while some continued to exist and caused lasting divisions in the Church. The 5<sup>th</sup> century is well known in the history of the Church for the *Trinitarian and Christological controversies*, which rocked the Churches throughout the East. The confession of the 'Lordship of Christ' or his divinity seemed to be a threat to the staunch monotheism of Judaism. The Christian answer to this dilemma was the doctrine of the Trinity - One Godhead in Three Persons, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, and Jesus Christ was understood to be the Son, the Second person of the Trinity. But how could Christ be both God and man, divine and human at the same time? The traditional answer was that Christ is 'fully God' and 'fully man', that He has two natures, human and divine, subsisting in one and the same person. These Trinitarian and Christological discussions and controversies were mainly confined to the two rival schools of *Alexandria* and *Antioch* that had quite different cultural backgrounds and approaches. In Christology the Alexandrians stressed the divinity of Christ, whereas the Antiocheans emphasized the humanity of Christ. *Nestorius* of the Antiochean School became Patriarch of Constantinople in 428. Alexandrians suspected his orthodoxy, and under the leadership of Bishop Cyril they accused him of heresy. It was alleged that he taught that in Christ there existed two natures and two persons, divine and human, disrupting unity in the personality of Jesus, and declaring Blessed Virgin Mary 'Mother of Jesus', and not 'Mother of God'. Nestorius was condemned at the Council of Ephesus in 431 even before his arrival at the Council. It means that he was not given a chance to explain his views and to defend himself. He was forced to go into exile and he took refuge in the Persian Empire and the East-Syrian Church or the Persian Church or the Assyrian Church of the East gave him asylum and supported

him and his party. The tragic consequence was that the Persian Church was separated from the other Churches and was accused of 'Nestorianism'. Today one of the factions of the St. Thomas Christians of India is also classified under the Assyrian Church of the East as it had received a bishop from it and thus established hierarchical connection with it.

Historians and theologians find it today very difficult to establish that Nestorius was really 'Nestorian'. Majority of scholars think that he was not 'Nestorian'. He only wanted to emphasize the humanity of Jesus Christ along with the Antiochean School and to oppose the Alexandrian view of 'one nature of the Incarnate God'. Patriarch Mar Dinkha IV of the Assyrian Church of the East has clearly expressed the wish that they shall no more be called 'Nestorian'. On 11<sup>th</sup> November 1994 a common declaration was signed between the Roman Catholic Church and the Assyrian Church of the East, signed by Pope John Paul II and Patriarch Mar Dinkha IV. In that declaration both affirmed their common faith in the mystery of Christ, who is both divine and human and stated that "the divisions brought about...(in the past) were due in large part to misunderstandings".<sup>2</sup>

The division of the so-called *Monophysite Churches* is part of the same story. The Churches, which condemned Nestorius and his followers gradually went to the other extreme by not sufficiently emphasizing the 'human nature' of Christ. Eutyches the Abbot was their spokesperson and he is alleged to have taught that in Christ there existed only one nature, *monophysis*, that the human nature was swallowed up by the divine, just 'as a drop of honey which falls into the sea, dissolves in it'. Eutyches claimed that he was only following the teaching of Cyril of Alexandria. And, in fact, the successor of Cyril, Patriarch Dioscorus of Alexandria, supported Eutyches. The Council of Chalcedon in 451 condemned this 'monophysite' doctrine and defined that "in Christ two natures without confusion and division are united in one person or *hypostasis*."<sup>3</sup> This Chalcedonian doctrinal formulation was rejected by some Churches on the plea that it goes

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2 AAS 87 (1995) 686.

3 Neuner and Dupuis, *The Christian Faith*, Bangalore: TPI, 2001, No.615.



back to the 'Nestorian heresy' of separation of two natures, and they preferred the phrase of Cyril of Alexandria, "the one nature of God the Word incarnate". They are traditionally known as the 'Monophy-site Churches'. They are the Egyptian or Coptic Church, the Ethiopian Church, the Armenian Church and the West-Syrian Jacobite Church or the Antiochean Church, Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church and the Erithrean Orthodox Church (separated from the Coptic Church in 1993). They are also known as 'non-Chalcedonian Churches'. It was the second major division in Christianity.

The above-mentioned two groups of Churches (so-called Nestorian and Monophysite) are also called 'Oriental Orthodox Churches' to distinguish them from Eastern Orthodox Churches (the Church of Constantinople and its allies). Today we know well that what is behind these divisions is not so much of faith and doctrine, but other forces and factors, such, nationalism, cultural and philosophical differences, linguistics and political and human rivalries. A common declaration between Pope Paul VI and Patriarch Mar Yacob III of the Syrian Orthodox (West Syrian Jacobite) Church in 1971 stated that "there is no difference in the faith they profess concerning the mystery of the Word of God made flesh and became really man, even if over the centuries difficulties have risen out of the different theological expressions by which this faith was expressed".<sup>4</sup> The first Joint Consultation of theologians of Oriental Orthodox and Roman Catholic in 1971 made the following statement:

We find our common basis in the same apostolic tradition, particularly as affirmed in the Nicean-Constantinopolitan creed. We all confess the dogmatic decisions and teachings of Nicea (325), Constantinople (381), and Ephesus (431); we all agree in rejecting both the Nestorian and Eutychian positions about Jesus Christ... We believe that our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ, is the God the Son Incarnate; perfect in his divinity and perfect in his humanity. His divinity was not separated from humanity for a single moment, not for the twinkling of an eye.

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4 AAS 63 (1971) 814.



His humanity is one with his divinity without commixion, without confusion, without division, without separation. We in our common faith in the one Lord Jesus Christ, regard his mystery inexhaustible and ineffable and for the human mind never fully comprehensible or expressible.<sup>5</sup>

Similar statements and joint-declarations of agreement in Christological faith were made between the heads of Roman Catholic Church and those of individual Oriental Orthodox Churches on various occasions.<sup>6</sup> It means that on Christological faith there is no more division between Roman Catholic, Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox Churches. The remaining obstacle to mutual communion is the concept of Papacy, the theory and practice of Papal Primacy, which has to be further, studied and agreed upon.

### **Division Between East and West:**

#### **Separation of Orthodox and Catholic Churches**

The third major division was the *separation of Eastern and Western Christianity* in 1054. The reasons behind this division were more political than doctrinal. Ever since the foundation of the city of Constantinople as the “new Rome” and the division of the Roman Empire into East and West, political rivalry between Rome and Constantinople was fermenting. Differences in language, culture, liturgy and theology gradually widened the gulf between East and West. In 381 the Council of Constantinople in its canon 111 declared that the bishop of Constantinople has preeminence of honor after the bishop of Rome, because Constantinople is the New Rome. But Rome did not approve this canon. As the power of the Roman emperors declined and the Frankish kings emerged as a decisive political force in Europe, the Popes began to depend on them and in 800 Charles the Great was crowned by Pope Leo III as the ‘Holy Roman

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5 See, *Wort und Wahrheit*, Supplementary Issue, Nr. 5, 1989, pp.151-152. The Ecumenical Foundation Pro Oriente, established by Cardinal Koenig of Vienna to promote the mutual understanding between Roman Catholic, Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox Churches, organized the Vienna theological consultations.

6 *Ibid.*, p. 163 ff.

Emperor'. This offended the Eastern Roman emperors, who ruled most part of Italy including Rome. This increasing polarization between West and East showed itself in the 9<sup>th</sup> century in the so-called doctrinal controversy of the *filioque*. The Western interpolation of *filioque* (it means 'and from the Son') in the Nicene Creed - the addition in the article that 'the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father *and the Son*' - was bitterly attacked by Photius, the Patriarch of Constantinople and others in the East as an innovation and doctrinally heretical. For it would imply that there are two sources in the Holy Trinity, the Father and the Son. The Father alone as the single unique source of the Holy Trinity was the ancient and orthodox position. In fact in a clarification given in 1995 by the Pontifical Council for Christian Unity, it was explained that the *filioque* insertion was only a liturgical adaptation of the Nicene Creed and that the Greek original without the insertion remains for all Churches the normative text.

The actual break between the East and West came in the year 1054 when a Papal delegation went to Constantinople and the chief Papal delegate Cardinal Humbert laid on the altar of the St. Sophia Cathedral in Constantinople the 'Papal Bull' excommunicating the Patriarch of Constantinople, Michael Cerularius, for his unwelcoming attitude as well as his heretical ideas and practices. The Patriarch in turn excommunicated the Papal delegates. These unfortunate events together with the atrocities of the 'Crusaders', who had sacked the city of Constantinople and desecrated the Cathedral, perpetuated the division between the Eastern Orthodox and the Western Roman Catholic Churches. The Easterners, although agreement was reached in the councils, finally rejected the reunion councils of Lyons and Florence, and this tragic division between the two great Churches still continues.

By the term Orthodox Church today we mean the ancient Byzantine Imperial Church and all its daughter Churches in south and central Europe that came out of the mission from Constantinople. The Eastern Orthodoxy today consists of several independent Patriarchates, such as, Istanbul, Russia, Jerusalem, Antioch, Alexandria, Serbia, Greece etc. Altogether there are 15 'autocephalous' Churches (autocephalous means that they can appoint

their own chief bishop) out of which 8 are Patriarchates. They include also some other 'autonomous Churches' and still others with special links to the see of Constantinople.<sup>7</sup> All the Orthodox Churches are held together by certain common tradition and organized under the 'Pan Orthodox Conference' established in 1961. The specific characteristics of the Orthodox Churches are emphasis on the mystery of the Church (not in favour of defining faith), centrality of liturgy (*lex orandi, lex credendi*) pneumatology, autonomy and autocephaly of the local churches and synodal functioning of the Church.

Today with Vatican II the Orthodox and Catholic theologies and ecclesiologies have met each other and mutually being enriched. Vatican II made a radical change from the scholastic approach and pyramidal ecclesiology emphasizing the Patristic and Biblical spirit, the mystery of the Church, the People of God and Collegiality. Vatican II also honoured the Orthodox Churches as 'Sister Churches'. Many of the recent Popes have acknowledged that the East and the West are the two lungs of the Church and it has to breath with both of them. In 1965 at the end of Vatican II both Pope Paul VI and Patriarch Athenagoras of Istanbul simultaneously expressed their regret over the incidents of 1054 and lifted the mutual excommunications. The Papal Primacy still remains an outstanding issue.

### **Protestant and Catholic Division**

The fourth major division in the Church happened in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, and this happened within the Western Catholicism as a consequence of the *Protestant Reformation* led by Martin Luther, John Calvin, Ulrich Zwingli and several others. The Reformers challenged some of the doctrines and practices of the medieval Church, such as, the doctrine of indulgence, the doctrine and system of the Sacraments, which was looked upon as magical, and the almost dictatorial exercise of the Papal and Episcopal authority. They emphasized, on the other hand, religious freedom, personal experience, absolute sovereignty of God, supremacy of the Word of God in the Sacred Scriptures and democratic structures of authority. None of these Reformers really

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7 See for details, Ronald Roberson, *The Eastern Christian Churches*, Bangalore: TPI (Indian Edition), 2004, pp.47 – 160.

wanted a schism in the Church; what they called for was a thorough reform in the whole Church both in head and members. But because of the rejection of the demands of the Reformers and the total condemnation of their views by the official authorities of the Roman Church, they had to break away from the Church and found new ecclesial communities. Moreover, the Reformation period was marked by the Spirit of nationalism all over Europe and many of the European princes supported the Reformers and consequently several national and local Churches wanted independence and declared allegiance to the Reformers. The final result of the Reformation was not the emergence of one big separated Protestant Church, but several Protestant Churches and groups that disagreed and separated among themselves on matters of "faith and order".

The picture of the Protestant Churches today is very complex. They include numerous denominations, conservatives as well as progressives, fundamentalists as well as radicals. There are the traditional Churches like the Lutherans, Reformed or Presbyterians (after the Calvinist model) and the Anglicans, and others born out of further revivals like the Congregationalists, Baptists, Methodists, Quakers Brethren, the Disciples, the Pentecostals and so on. There are also some united Protestant Churches, which emerged out of the contemporary ecumenical movement by the merging together of many Protestant groups, like the Church of South India, the Church of North India etc. This wide spectrum of the Protestant Churches and the divisions among themselves make the task of unity today more and more difficult.

Today the Catholic-Protestant divide has been narrowed down by renewal and reform on both sides. The central doctrine of the Reformation was 'justification by faith'. It is agreed by all that salvation is a total free gift of God and not something we can purchase by our 'work'. On the doctrine of justification Protestants and Catholics have arrived at a consensus and agreement, as articulated recently by the Catholic and Lutheran Churches in Germany. One of the major demands of the Reformers was 'granting chalice to the laity' or Eucharistic communion in two species. The Catholic Church already implements this after Vatican II. The Protestant Reformers



questioned the magical and mechanical way of administering the sacraments and the autocracy of bishops and the Popes. The liturgical and sacramental renewal, rediscovery of the Word of God and the teaching of Collegiality in the Catholic Church are positive responses on the part of the Catholic Church. The Protestant Churches also have today rediscovered the value of sacraments and they have emphasized the 'real presence' of Christ in the Eucharist though the mode and manner of real presence may be explained in various ways. The consensus document made by the Faith and Order and the World Council of Churches (Lima document 1982) on 'Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry' has really made some breakthroughs. What is required today on the part of all the Churches is openness, ecumenical commitment, courage to change and move on with deep faith, hope and love.

### **Forces at Work in the Divisions of the Church**

The brief outline of the divisions in the history of Christianity given above has already indicated the various historical factors and forces that led to mutual condemnations and separations, the present ecumenical situation and the progress made today in the ecumenical movement. Here we should like to go deeper into the root causes of the divisions and uncover the layers one by one identifying the different forces at work. We identify five important areas of forces or factors that underlie the various historical divisions: Heretical Doctrines, Theological Differences, Social and Cultural Factors, Political Forces and Forces of Human Sin.<sup>8</sup>

#### **1. Heretical Doctrines**

Apparently the most obvious force or factor behind the divisions and separations in the history of the Church was heresy or deviation from the orthodox doctrines and teachings. In all the major ecclesial conflicts and divisions, personalities, groups and Churches were condemned or excommunicated because of apparent unorthodox

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8 This part of my article is an adapted version of one of the chapters of my recent book, *Ecumenism: Unity in Diversity*, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2006, pp. 10 – 20.

doctrinal teachings. Nestorians and Monophysites were excommunicated on the charge that they had deviated from the orthodox teaching in Christology, which safe-guarded the fullness of the humanity and divinity of Jesus Christ, the unity as well as the distinction of the human and divine natures in Christ. Nestorianism, on the one hand, apparently challenged the unity of the person of Christ, positing two 'persons' in Christ, the human and divine persons. Monophysitism, on the other, in effect denied the human nature of Christ, that the human nature was understood to be absorbed in the immensity of the divine nature. Doctrinal issues were also involved in the separation of the Eastern and Western Christianities. They seemed to differ on the doctrine of the procession of the Holy Spirit, the Third Person of the Holy Trinity, on the doctrine of the Roman Primacy and so on. The Reformation too was a doctrinal movement, which was condemned by the Roman Church as heretical. Luther's doctrine of 'justification by faith alone', and his doctrine of the Church and the concept of ministry were rejected as unorthodox.

Although the Churches are said to be divided on account of doctrinal differences, today historians find it very difficult to trace any heresy in Nestorius, Eutyches, Martin Luther and others. Often their opponents and enemies reported their doctrines and teachings and naturally they were exaggerated and quoted out of context. In all fairness, the doctrines and teachings of a person or Church should be taken in their totality and in their particular historical context. When taken in isolation, they may appear to be one-sided and heretical. Monophysitism can be understood only in the historical context of Nestorianism and *vice versa*. Nestorius in his autobiography gives the reasons for his controversy with Cyril of Alexandria. He saw in Cyril's doctrine of the 'one nature of the incarnate Logos' the 'Docetic and Manichaeistic evaporation of Christ's human nature'. So he wanted to emphasize the integrity of each of the two natures in Christ. He says that when he opposed calling Mary *Theotokos* (Mother of God) he did not mean to deny the Godhead of Christ, but that he wanted to emphasize that Christ had been born of Mary as a genuine human being with body and soul. Nestorius also confessed that his

teachings were not different from that of Pope Leo I and Patriarch Flavian of Constantinople.<sup>9</sup> After all, the formal Nestorian confession of 486 was little different from the definition of the Council of Chalcedon.<sup>10</sup> With regard to the Greek schism it must be noted that in the Reunion Council of Florence (1438) both Easterners and Westerners agreed that there were no real doctrinal differences between them. It was just a case of formulating the same doctrine in different ways. Similarly at the conference of Ratisbon in 1541 held for effecting reconciliation between Catholics and Protestants, both parties agreed upon the 'doctrine of justification by faith', which was supposed to be the bone of contention.

Historically speaking, the Churches were said to be divided on doctrinal issues. However it seems to be very difficult to prove today by objective historical studies that the divided or separated Churches were really heretical. The general conclusion would be that the Churches were in fact divided not so much on doctrinal issues but more on factors of a non-doctrinal nature. The forces behind most of the divisions were more theological than doctrinal.

## 2. *Theological Differences*

Today many of the scholars and historians would agree that in the Nestorian and the Monophysite divisions in the Church the crux of the issue was not so much doctrinal as theological. The controversies and definitions at Ephesus and Chalcedon were centred on the basic Christological doctrine that Jesus Christ is "God-Man". Nestorius, Cyril, Eutyches and others were trying to explain this Christological mystery and dogma in philosophical terms and categories prevalent in their own circles. As mentioned above the Alexandrian School of theology stressed the divinity of Christ whereas the Antiochean School emphasized the humanity of Christ. Both approaches had their merits and demerits. But the Church of the 5<sup>th</sup> century could not fully contain

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9 Bihlmeyer-Tuechle, *Church History*, Vol. I, Maryland: The Newman Press, 1958, pp.273.- 74.

10 Barry Till, *The Churches' Search for Unity*, Penguin Books, 1972, p. 102.

those theological differences, as uniformity in formulations was its primary concern. So the ecumenical councils of Ephesus and Chalcedon had to ally themselves with one theological School or another. Ephesus meant victory for the Alexandrian School, whereas at Chalcedon the Antiochean School got the upper hand.

Differences in theological thinking and Christian life-style, in fact, played the dominant role also in the division between the Eastern and Western Churches. The Easterners were not at home with the speculative, rational and scholastic theology of the West. Eastern theology was more Biblical, Patristic, poetic and apophatic. The emphasis in Eastern thinking was holistic and unitarian maintaining the unity of human and divine, Church and State, religion and politics, whereas the western thought-pattern was more dualistic separating human and divine, secular and sacred, Church and State. In other words, the whole theological ethos of the East and West was quite different. After all, Greek and Latin were two totally different languages, expressing two different mental horizons and in that context theological confusion and misunderstanding was inevitable to some extent.

The Protestant Reformation too was the result of a Theological shift, a break with the medieval scholastic theology and the option for a new Theology. In 1517 just before the emergence of the Reformation Martin Luther wrote as follows: "My theology, which is St. Augustine's, is getting on and is dominant in the university. God has done it. Aristotle is going down hill and perhaps he will go all the way down to hell...I am quite sure that the Church will never be reformed unless we get rid of canon law, scholastic theology, philosophy and logic as they are studied today, and put something else in their place".<sup>11</sup> Luther and the Reformers, in fact, followed the Nominalistic philosophy and theology of William Ockham (1290-1349) and others, which was known as the *via moderna*, and they rejected what was called the *via antiqua* of Thomas Aquinas. For Aquinas natural and supernatural are related. Supernatural is the perfection of the natural. But for

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11 Quoted from Owen Chadwick, *The Reformation*, (Pelican History of the Church), Vol.II, p. 46.



Ockham and the Reformers no bridge is provided between the natural and the supernatural. It is impossible to know God or reach God through nature and reason. We can know God only when God reveals Himself to the humans. Hence the Reformation dictums – *sola fide*, *sola gratia*, *sola scriptura* (faith alone, grace alone, scripture alone).

Hence it is rather clear that differences in theological thinking, systems and methods were at the root of almost all the divisions and separations in the Church. However, we should search still further for the roots of these theological differences or theological pluralism. It seems that social, cultural, linguistic, racial, psychological, economic, political and similar other differences are, in fact, at the root of theological differences.

### **3. Social and Cultural Factors**

Socio-cultural, economic and political factors that are divisive are often called 'non-theological factors'. But here the understanding of theology is defective. Theology is not universal, abstract and perennial since theologizing is not done in a vacuum. The Starting point of theology is one's own social, cultural and political context and realities, and socio-cultural factors are the matrix of theologizing. Emile Durkheim, Max Weber and other scholars in Sociology of Religion have clearly established the close relationship between religion and society, the dependence of religious beliefs, doctrines and practices on the social structures and cultural horizons. Consequently, a change in social structures and cultural horizons will inevitably affect the religious beliefs, doctrines and practices. Hence it can be reasonably concluded that doctrinal and theological differences have their deeper roots in the socio-cultural differences.

An impartial and objective study of the history of the Church will show that the Churches were divided and separated more often because of social, cultural and political forces. It is admitted by all that the socio-cultural, linguistic and racial differences between Alexandria and Antioch, between Rome and Constantinople played the major role in the historical divisions in the Church. We want to add and emphasize that the same was the case with regard to Protestant Reformation. The Reformation had as its back-ground

the collapse of the Rôman civilization, the decadence of the Latin language and literature and the emergence of a new society, culture and new languages together with an intellectual Renaissance, 'thinking in a new fashion, untrammled by the customary channels and conceptions of thought', a rational, critical examination of everything mundane and supramundane. It was a new spirit of humanism, freedom, democracy, scientific research and nationalism that clashed with the Roman supremacy and the age-old traditions, customs and theological thought-patterns of the Roman Church. "To be a Roman Catholic or Protestant did not mean simply to have a different faith, but also to have a different territory, different politics, different culture, even different economic principles".<sup>12</sup> It is very significant to note that when the Reformation became settled that part of Europe which had been thoroughly Romanized and spoke Romance languages stayed mostly Catholic and the other part, Teutonic, Scandinavian, Anglo-Saxon North, which was remote from the Roman civilization went Protestant.

In general it could be said that the ramifications and divisions in Christianity was the result of its encounter with the different cultural worlds. The earliest divisions on the basis of the Trinitarian and Christological controversies were the consequence of the meeting of Hebrew and Greek cultural worlds. The separation of the Orthodoxy and Roman Churches was the tragic result of a violent encounter between the Greek and the Roman worlds. Similarly, as mentioned above, the division into Catholic and Protestant happened in the encounter between the Roman and the Germanic cultural worlds. Such ramifications and diversifications of the Church are inevitable because of socio-cultural differences, whereas separations and breaking of communion on account of that is tragic as well as scandalous.

#### 4. *Political Forces*

The Political forces behind the historical divisions in the Church must be specifically pointed out although they cannot be strictly

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12 Skydsgaard, *One in Christ*, Philadelphia, Muhlenberg Press, 1957, p. 42.

separated from the social and cultural factors. Almost all the divisions in the Church under the Roman Empire occurred as the aftermath of the attempt of the emperors to stabilize and unify their empires by suppressing religious disputes and dissensions. All the early ecumenical councils were convened, controlled and often dictated by the emperors, and several of their decrees and decisions were coupled with political motivations and gains. Decisions, policies and orthodoxy itself often changed and sometimes reversed depending on the moods and minds of the emperors. In order to win a theological and religious controversy, it was very necessary to secure the support of the emperor and of his court.

The separation of the so-called Nestorian Church of Persia was a political necessity rather than the consequence of a heresy. The Roman Empire was a menace to the Persian State, and in Persia Christians were looked upon with suspicion and they were persecuted as a source of danger to the national unity, as 'potential Roman fifth column'. The Church in Persia therefore, had to be strongly nationalistic and independent for its own survival and thus had to break away from Constantinople.

Although the Council of Chalcedon condemned Monophysitism, it was still maintained in Palestine, Egypt and Syria because the emperors at Constantinople were sympathetic to the Monophysites. And it was simply to appease the Monophysites and thus to restore the threatened unity of the Empire that emperor Justinian condemned posthumously the three leaders of the Antiochean School, Theodore of Mopsuestia, Theodoret of Cyrus and Ibas of Edessa, known in history as "Three-chapter controversy". When Pope Vigilius opposed it, Justinian held a General Council at Constantinople in 553 and had the Pope excommunicated.

The separation between the Western Roman Church and Eastern Orthodox Church was altogether a political event. It was the separation of two Empires rather than two Churches. Rome's dependence upon the new and rising power of the Frankish kings and its climax of the coronation of Charles the Great by Pope Leo III in 800 A. D. as the 'Holy Roman Emperor', was actually the primary factor for the widening gulf between Rome and Constantinople. The

doctrinal and theological disputes such as “filioque” flared up in this context of historical tensions and conflicts and as a reaction to the ecclesial supremacy of Rome, and the mutual excommunications of 1054 was only a final tragic sequel.

The political force behind the Reformation cannot be forgotten either. The success of the Reformation owed entirely to the support given to it by the German Princes and to the dominant Spirit of Nationalism in the Europe of the 16th century. The political disunity and divisions of Europe preceded the religious divisions of the Reformation. Thus political forces can be clearly established in all the major divisions in the history of the Church.

### ***5. Forces of Human Sin***

Last but not least, for a comprehensive explanation for the divisions in the Church we have to take into account the forces of sin both among individuals and communities. All divisions and separations in the Church were born in the womb of human sin, sin against the unity of the Body of Christ, sin on both sides, on the part of those who broke away from the Church and on the part of those who excommunicated them. Behind these divisions lie the sin of human pride, selfishness, self-sufficiency, arrogance, rebellion against lawful authority, abuse of authority, high-handedness of those in authority, personal rivalries, mutual contempt and so on.

Rivalry between the Alexandrian and Antiochean Schools, between Cyril and Nestorius, between Rome and Constantinople, between Rome and the new European Nations, played a very decisive role in the historical divisions in the Church. Had Cyril and Nestorius been more patient to understand each other and more soft spoken, charitable and forgiving, perhaps, the Nestorian and subsequent Monophysite divisions would not have occurred. If Cardinal Humbert, the chief of the Roman delegation to Constantinople in 1054, had not been so arrogant and the Patriarch Michael Cerularius not so stubborn, the East-West division could have been very well avoided. The Reformation was an honest appeal and a sincere call for the reform of the Catholic Church, which had become very corrupt ‘both in head and members’. If the authorities of the Roman Church had not been so autocratic and arrogant, with closed minds, quick in dismissing the views and challenges of the Reformers, perhaps, the unity of the



medieval Church could have been safeguarded.

## Conclusion

From the above discussions of the brief history of the divisions in Christianity and the analysis of the various forces behind them the following conclusions may be drawn:

a) Every living religion is in continuous dialogue with its own inherited tradition *vis-à-vis* contemporary experience and the result is a continuous process assimilation, adaptation and transformation. In this dynamic process of development or growth, new understandings, interpretations and elaborations of its doctrines, beliefs and practices will emerge. Naturally this will engender tensions, conflicts, and controversies between progressives and conservatives in the community and may lead to new factions, divisions and denominations within every religious tradition. Refusal and unwillingness to reform according to the times will inevitably lead to divisions and separations. Enlightened groups will be forced to make an exodus and form different communities or systems.

b) Every religion born in a particular culture and people tends to be universal by embracing other peoples and cultures. In this encounter with other cultures and peoples the original religion will naturally undergo some transformation, adaptation and inculturation, and subsequently ramifications and diversifications of the original religious tradition is inevitable. Naturally it may lead to tensions and conflicts, and in the event of lack of mutual acceptance and recognition new religious denominations will be born.

c) Religious pluralism, denominational pluralism, doctrinal pluralism and theological pluralism are the order of the day and they seem to be the irreversible pattern of the future. So any religion, which is unable or unwilling to accommodate within it a legitimate diversity, will inevitably end up in divisions, factions and separations. So 'unity in diversity' is the only acceptable and viable model for the Church, for the various living religions and for the different denominations within the same religion.

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# The Ecumenical Movement Under World Council of Churches : Achievements and Failures

K.C. Abraham\*

Ecumenism or Ecumenical movement was formerly, say in 1900s, the name of a movement of Protestant churches for achieving Christian Unity. It was an effort to mend the broken relations created by the Reformation. By 1947 it became the World Council of Churches(WCC), both Protestant and Orthodox. Later other churches also joined the movement except Roman Catholic Church which cooperates with it in its own way. Three streams have flowed into the great river of the Ecumenical Movement, namely, Mission, Life and Work, Faith and Order. Through such varied activities W.C.C. has made significant contributions to the life and mission of the Church and developed a formidable array of vibrant theological thinking and broadened vision of the ecumenical movement. W.C.C.meets every seven years. In spite of the Post-Vatican developments and better co-operation among the churches in general and of several new ventures , a mood of ecumenical exhaustion seems to have set in. At the same time ecumenism itself has acquired a wider meaning , namely, the unity of the human family , nay, of the whole creation.. It raises some critical questions regarding WCC, which have to be dealt with in the spirit of self-criticism.

The Ecumenical movement, as William Temple once put it, “is the great new fact of our era”. In the sermon at the opening service of the Second World Conference on Faith and Order, Edinburgh he further affirmed that “our unity in dependence for our faith upon the

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unique act of one God is a perpetual and unalterable fact.” and added that “A church divided in its manifestation to the world cannot render its due service to God or to man.”<sup>1</sup>

Although the word *ecumenism* has gained some currency among Christians, it still remains a strange and obscure word to many, including some members of the churches. It is not uncommon for us at the Ecumenical Christian Centre, Whitefield, Bangalore when I served as its Director, to receive letters addressed to the “Economical Centre”! Many conveniently avoid using the term for fear of wrongly pronouncing it. The root word in Greek means “*belonging to the whole inhabited earth*”. In this sense the term ecumenical can refer to any attempt or endeavour that has a universal significance – that which brings all men and women together.

### **The World Council of Churches – An Expression of Ecumenism**

The word Ecumenism is specifically used for a movement among Protestant churches in the early 1900s aimed at achieving universal Christian unity and church union through inter-denominational organisations. In due course the Orthodox Churches became involved. Perhaps one should use the term “church union movement” to describe such early efforts. But the term “ecumenical” was chosen not because of theologians’ proclivity for mysterious Greek and Latin terms and in order to impress the laity! By using this term they wanted to express the concern that the union of the churches should not be seen as an end in itself. It was perceived as a means for achieving the wider unity of all men and women. This purposeful, missionary motive is conveyed through the deliberate choice of a rather uncommon term. The union of the churches and the union of humanity are two foci held in tension in the modern understanding of ecumenism.

Formed in 1947 the World Council of Churches represents the major protestant churches and the orthodox churches.

Ecumenical movement was an effort to mend the broken relations that were created subsequent to the Reformations. It was a major breakthrough.

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1 Quoted in *The Ecumenical Movement : An Anthology of Key Texts and Voices*, ed. by Michael Kinnamon and Brian E. Cope, W.C.C. Publications, Geneva, 1997, p.1.

## **I. Formative factors that helped the Union**

### **a) *Missionary movement***

The late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries constituted a distinctly missionary era. A striking feature of this time was the way in which ecumenical co-operation was forged among the leading mission societies as the best way of proclaiming one Christ. Each missionary society delimited its area of work and unhealthy competition was avoided. The purpose of ecumenism was the proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Missionaries have to face the question – Is Christ divided? Is there a Presbyterian Christ, different from a Baptist Christ? These ground realities made them think about the nurture of church unity. First missionary conference was held in Edinburgh 1910. All the participants except a few like Bishop Azariah of Dornakal were from the European world, the sending churches. The discussions centred around evangelistic methods and the problems of non-Christian culture and religions. Other missionary conferences followed.

### **b) *Response to humanitarian problems and ecumenical movements***

Ecumenical movements like Y.M.C.A., Y.W.C.A. and S.C.M. brought together Christians, mostly young people, from different denominations to involve themselves in the service of the nation on the basis of Christian principles. Later on, the Freedom Struggle united politically conscious youth in the churches. Here proclamation of Christ was given new meaning – the proclamation through action and struggle. Christ was seen as one who transforms not only the individual but also the society. Seeds of what we may call wider ecumenism were sown at this stage; that is, that ecumenism in which one discovers unity across religious boundaries, provided there is a common commitment to the values of the Kingdom.

These experiences led to the formation of ‘*Life and Work*’ conferences. Representatives from different denominations were brought together to discuss the church’s responsibility to the world.

### **c) *Faith and Order meetings***

It is well known that there were deep differences around the interpretation of some crucial doctrines – Eucharist, ministry and the church polity. Whether episcopal polity or Presbyterian polity? How



to interpret ordination? All these questions were dealt with in the conferences of Faith and Order. Sometimes Roman Catholic representatives participated as observers. In fact BEM (Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry) document contains some agreed statements on these doctrines. Certainly a significant level of consensus was obtained by these efforts.

These three streams have flown into the great river of ecumenical movement represented by the W.C.C. : Mission, Life and Work and Faith and Order. *World Council of Churches* became a nodal agency that brings together the churches on programmes relating to these concerns. It is not super church, nor an amalgam of churches, but an organisation that facilitates joint cooperation and action in the three areas mentioned earlier. Over the years its impact has been varied and significant. The distance between denominations has considerably shortened. We should mention that some of the so-called conservative evangelicals, some Baptists, Pentecostals (except some of the Latin American Pentecostals that joined W.C.C. in recent years) and Holiness groups keep themselves outside this framework.

A distinctly new stage was reached in the negotiations that led to the formation of the *Church of South India* in 1947. It was acclaimed to be the first union between episcopal and non-episcopal churches, an epoch-making event. The purpose of the union was declared to be missionary in the Indian context. It is difficult to analyse the life and mission of the C.S.I. during the past thirty-eight years. Suffice it to say that the denominational differences soon disappeared and the Church has become organisationally one. This is not to ignore the many conflicts generated by caste and language loyalties that have plagued the life of the Church. Nor are we forgetting the litigation which has become a way of life for many dioceses. Perhaps study needs to be made of the sociological factors that cause these tensions, but that cannot be attempted here.

Following the C.S.I. union came the formation of the *Church of North India* and, not long afterwards, of the Joint Council of the C.S.I., and the C.N.I. and the Mar Thoma Church. Church union talks continue between the C.S.I. and the Lutheran churches and between the C.N.I. and the Methodist Church of India. Of course, in recent years questions have been raised about the suitability of the C.S.I. /C.N.I. model of Church unity. We cannot hold up one model as equally applicable to all times and situations. But the merit of this

model is its concreteness, and in the absence of a more definite pattern we need to affirm its historical importance.

## **II. The Main Programmes of W.C.C.**

Through its many and varied activities and conferences, W.C.C. has made a significant contribution to the life and mission of the Church. The gathering of representatives of most of the Protestant and Orthodox churches in the world – Roman Catholic Church participated in the Faith and Order Committee – proved to be a great happening every seven years. After a careful preparation of background papers the World Assembly deliberated on issues that confront the Churches at large. Involvement of the Church in mission, development, concerns of women and youth and multi-faith dialogue are some of the issues that occupied the attention of the assembly. In fact, the preparatory volumes, the main addresses and the discussions in groups that usually spans over one month together constitute formidable array of vibrant theological thinking and a broadened vision of ecumenical movement.

Regional challenges faced by the churches were addressed in the context of the assembly. In the early times there was a predominance of European agenda in the discussions. But the participation of the third world leaders and churches helped the WCC to be responsive to the concerns of Asia and Africa. Poverty and pluralism and their interlinking posed a serious challenge to the world church and particularly to the churches in the Third World.

Discussions on Church's participation in Development, drawing from the experience of struggle from the third world, have deepened our understanding of the Church's responsibility to poverty and social and economic development. Land mark studies on these issues and theological reflections embedded in them are a most valuable source for our understanding of the church's task in the modern world. Justice, particularly the participatory structures of it, assumed a special place in all the discussions. Along with it an affirmation that peace is integral to the attainment of justice provided a clear perspective on the many struggles of people. Later on when the ecological concerns were brought into the discussions on development, the slogan that was characteristic of the time was 'Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation'. A search for a holistic understanding of development is thus the goal of ecumenical action.

In 1983 Vancouver Assembly called on the Council to engage member churches in a Conciliar process of mutual commitment (Covenant) to justice, peace and integrity of creation:

**“We affirm that the earth is the Lord’s.**

*We affirm* that the land belongs to God. Human use of land and waters should release the earth to regularly replenish its life-giving power, protecting its integrity and providing spaces for its creatures.

*We will resist* any policy that treats land merely as a marketable commodity; that allows speculation at the expense of the poor; that dumps poisonous wastes into the land and the waters; that promotes exploitation, unequal distribution or contamination of the land and its products; and that prevents those who live directly from the land from being its real trustees.”<sup>2</sup>

Participation in development oriented towards just structure with ecological accountability has made a profound impact on the nature of church’s involvement in the world. From a service and charity oriented approach the church is challenged to take steps that lead to the radical alteration of the structures of oppression and injustice. This alone will bring about the desired change in the condition of poverty and other forms of misery. W.C.C. even initiated some radical action, political in nature, in countries in Asia and Africa in the name of justice. Some of these actions were controversial, like the programme to combat racism and the involvement in the civil war in Rhodesia. As a result some of the conservative wings in the church registered their strong protest and even terminated their membership in the council. Nevertheless, the church at large was challenged to meaningful action in its witness to a just God and not be satisfied by mere rhetoric.

Reviewing the activities and programmes of W.C.C. in the last half a century or more of its existence, one may say that it has been a forum of the churches to come together for common thinking and mutual challenge for cooperative action on mission, development, justice and peace. It has generated new thinking in the area of church’s mission and its life.

Involvement of W.C.C. at the international level should deserve special mention. The W.C.C.’s presence in the areas of political

conflicts in South Vietnam, China in Asia and Rhodesia and South Africa in Africa are widely appreciated. Peaceful intervention and mediation on a low profile were characteristic of the W.C.C.'s involvement through its 'Commission on International Affairs'.

Conferences and study on political and social witness, church and society, unity and Dialogue are too numerous to mention here. But in passing we must notice that all these activities that embrace worldwide membership is possible only with the support of a mammoth infrastructure. The central office located in Geneva has a fairly large secretariat with thousands of full-time workers. An enormous budget for maintaining it and for running programmes is required.

During recent decades there has been a general decline in the churches' commitment to ecumenism. Church union negotiations seem to have lost their momentum. In spite of post-Vatican II developments and better co-operation among churches in general, and of several new ventures, a mood of ecumenical exhaustion seems to have set in. At the same time, ecumenism itself has acquired a wider meaning. The unity of the human family, in fact of the whole of creation, is increasingly being recognized as the goal of the ecumenical movement, and the overcoming of divisions in the Christian churches is seen as only a part of the total ecumenical mission.

### III. A Perspective

S. Kappen an Indian theologian in his writings makes mention of two types of ecumenism, 'ecumenism of domination and ecumenism of freedom'.<sup>3</sup> Ecumenism of domination is an attempt by a human group – caste, community or race – to impose on others its own particular vision and way of life as valid for all. "Ecumenism of freedom, on the other hand seeks to create a universal community in which the different races, castes, cultures and religions will be able to develop each according to its own specific genius and tradition while at the same time enrich and being enriched by one another." Kappen raises a provocative question, 'Do we practise an ecumenism of domination in our churches?' There are other writers who distinguish between an ecumenism of domination which is represented by the globalisation process – as it is directed exclusively towards profit and power over others, and the ecumenism that concerns itself

3 *Jesus and Society*, ISPCCK, Delhi, 2002, p.149.



in furthering the struggle for justice. One may describe the movements of all the marginal sectors – dalits, tribals and women – as the ecumenism of freedom or solidarity. Do we opt for the ecumenism of solidarity as the goal of the Church's mission?

#### **IV. Some Critical Remarks on W.C.C.**

From the above perspective we may raise some critical questions to W.C.C. in the spirit of self-criticism.

*First, the growing irrelevance of the W.C.C. for the life of faith communities in Asia:* In the past the ecumenical movement, especially the W.C.C., made significant impact on the life of the church in general. But today there arises numerous faith communities that are ignorant of the W.C.C. and its manifold activities. After teaching theology and directing a programme of theological research for thirty years, I now associate myself with three different communities. I live in a complex of apartments where a majority of the residents are young professionals of the I.T. companies. There is a community of Christians and it is orientated to a charismatic form of worship and piety. They meet every week in a chapel built in the complex for worship. I am appalled at how ignorant they are about ecumenical concerns and they seldom read the literature that comes out of the W.C.C. Many feel, thanks to effective propaganda, that the W.C.C. distorts the fundamental message of the bible and they want to keep away from it.

The second community that I am involved in is a slum. Poverty, malnutrition, and lack of hygiene are the miserable conditions of the people here. Majority belong to the Hindu tradition, but there are some Muslims and Christians. Women go through peculiar hardships, especially since they are abused and deserted by their alcoholic husbands. Liberation from these offensive conditions is what they long for. They have no awareness of the W.C.C. and its programmes of combating violence.

Then, the third community is that of a group of mentally challenged. I have often felt that they 'mock at' you and your theology and preaching. They do not understand the rhetoric we use although they experience moments of togetherness and love in their brokenness.

Which are the faith communities that have the use of the W.C.C.? Perhaps some of the leaders who commute between Geneva and

India may know about W.C.C., but seldom have they influenced the communities of the vulnerable and the marginal. This serious situation of growing irrelevance should be a matter of concern for us.

*Second, Eurocentric thinking and discourse:* It is true that W.C.C. has provided space for many Asian leaders to articulate their concerns. Some of its thinking is shaped by Asian Theologians. Nevertheless, there is a feeling that the discourse of the W.C.C. is Eurocentric. The categories of thoughts and the framework of theology are all rooted in the liberal tradition of the West. Those Asian elite who had imbibed this tradition felt 'at home' in this theological climate. But today when we are committed to evolving a theological discourse fully rooted in the contextual realities of the marginal communities like, dalits, tribals and others, we do not find the mainstream discourse of the W.C.C. very helpful.

Today in Asia there is a search for meaningful communities which should exist in harmonious relation with nature, and with different faiths. These will be communities that refuse to accept the logic of profit and progress which has turned our life into commodities. They will be different from the traditional collectives that have submerged out of selfhood and suppressed our women. They will be communities that have overcome all human-made barriers of caste, creed and religion and that celebrate their common humanity, "living life to the full, in harmony with self, others and nature".

Can the Ecumenical movement respond to this search for community building in Asia?

*Third, a centralized, bureaucratic structure:* Over the years the W.C.C. has built a top-heavy, bureaucratic structure for its programmes. It baffles us to think how a centralized structure situated in one corner of the world, however important that corner may be, can permeate its influence across the globe. To maintain its structure and its programmes, gigantic resources, from the stand point of poor people, are spent - one may have to think about the effectiveness of it. Can we think about a different model of operation? Can we have its offices and coordinators placed in their own geographical contexts maintaining a structure that is conducive to the local cultures and through interaction and mutual consultation undertake a common programme? In other words, the general secretary will be in Africa

and other coordinators in Asia or Europe. They will constantly be in touch through electronic media which has made possible, effective and faster communication. A bottom up structure, versus a top-heavy, will, in my judgment, be viable and more effective. It will acquire a flavour that is truly local and indigenous. This may sound a bit outrageous since we are so accustomed to a particular style of function, but a change of direction is urgently called for.

*Fourthly, the search for an adequate theological framework:* Konrad Raiser the W.C.C.'s fifth General Secretary in a perceptive article points out that the ecumenical vision of the first three decades of the W.C.C. was guided by a theological framework which can be described as "*Christo-centric Universalism*". Raiser further points out that "this vision focussed on the assumption that Christian culture and Christian values could be extended throughout the world since this was believed to be the safeguard of a human order".<sup>4</sup> In this paradigm a universal significance of Christ's reality was unambiguously affirmed. But whether they have been really successful in building the bridge between people of other faiths and their experiences is a moot question. S.J. Samartha in his book, *One Christ Many Religions*, points out that "there are those Christians who are seriously committed against injustice in the world, who are actively involved in movements of liberation together with neighbours of other faiths who believe that they participate in this work in the name of Christ, but find it difficult, if not impossible, to accept that only in the Judaeo-Christian-Western tradition there are spiritual resources of this struggle."<sup>5</sup> This has posed a serious challenge to the traditional way of doing theology. In Asia where we face the challenges of religious plurality and poverty we need a reformulation of traditional theology. How far the W.C.C. helps us in this task is a significant question for us in Asia.

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4 Quoted in *The Ecumenical Movement : An Anthology of Key Texts and Voices*, ed. By Michael Kinnamon and Brian E. Cope. W.C.C. Publications, Geneva, 1997.

5 S.J. Samartha in *One Christ Many Religions*, Orbis Books, New York, 1994, p.108.

# **“Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry” – Reception, Impact and Continuing Work**

**Dagmar Heller**

The document on “Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry” (abbreviation: BEM) was drafted by the Commission on Faith and Order of the World Council of Churches (WCC) and published in 1982. At that time it was considered as a breakthrough in the ecumenical discussions as it was for the first time, that theologians from practically all the different Christian traditions (including the Roman Catholic Church, which, although not being a member of the WCC, has been participating officially in the commission on Faith and Order since 1968) had agreed on common theological formulations on these three issues, which are basic for the ecumenical discussion. The text was widely circulated and translated into more than 30 languages. It found a great interest in many churches and was discussed on a rather broad basis. After a bit more than 25 years, therefore, it is legitimate to ask, what happened to this text. In which way has this text been received by the churches? Has there been a sustainable effect on the churches? Did the text effect any changes in the ecumenical relationships between the different churches? This article will, after summarizing the contents and the main solutions proposed by BEM<sup>1</sup> to overcome the separations, give an overview on the reception process and analyze the impact of BEM on the ecumenical discourse before giving an outline of the further process.

## **BEM – A Convergence Document**

The document on “Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry” is the result of more than 50 years of discussion. The Faith and Order movement started already in the beginning of the 20th century, parallel to other ecumenical initiatives. It felt especially responsible to take up the theological differences which separate the churches. Therefore the first World Conference on



Faith and Order in 1927 in Lausanne/Switzerland put as main issues on its agenda: Scripture, the Church, the Sacraments, and Faith.

While in 1927 and also during the second World Conference on Faith and Order in 1937 these issues were discussed in a comparative way, in 1952 at the III World Conference on Faith and Order in Lund the famous 'Lund principle' was established: "We have now reached a crucial point in our ecumenical discussions. As we have come to know one another better our eyes have been opened to the depth and pain of our separations and also to our fundamental unity. The measure of unity which has been given to the Churches to experience together must now find clearer manifestation. ... There are truths about the nature of God and His Church which will remain for ever closed to us unless we act together in obedience to the unity which is already ours. We would, therefore, earnestly request our Churches to consider whether they are doing all they ought to do to manifest the oneness of the people of God. Should not our Churches ask themselves whether they are showing sufficient eagerness to enter into conversation with other Churches, and *whether they should not act together in all matters except those in which deep differences of conviction compel them to act separately?*"<sup>2</sup> In other words the perspective was changed: from a comparative standing opposite to each other, the churches would now look together upon Jesus Christ and his will for unity. Instead of comparing the different positions they would now do (and say) together what can be done (and said) together. This methodological change was the basis for the further work which finally led to the publication of BEM.

BEM is called a 'convergence document'. This is a new genre of text within theological ecumenical work. 'Convergence' comes from the

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- 1 This part of the article in no way can be exhaustive of the different issues raised by BEM, but will rather pick up some of the main issues especially as they appear from a protestant perspective, which the author cannot deny.
  - 2 The Third World Conference on Faith and Order, Lund 1952, ed. Oliver S. Tomkins, London SCM, 1953, pp.15-16, printed in: The Ecumenical Movement. An Anthology of Key Texts and Voices, ed. by Michael Kinnamon and Brian E. Cope, WCC Publications Geneva/W.B. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan 1997, pp.462-463 (Italics by D.H.)

Latin word 'convergere', which means 'to come together'. A convergence text therefore tries to bring the different positions closer together.<sup>3</sup> Or, in other words: It tries to formulate what can be said together and tries to find solutions, how different positions concerning a specific problem can come closer together. The BEM document does this for the questions of Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry. It consists - for each of these themes - of a text, which formulates common convictions and of a commentary which explains the still existing problems and gives in some cases a proposal as to which direction a solution could be found.

The following examples from each of the 3 themes will explain the convergence methodology in a more concrete way and summarize the main proposals of the BEM text for overcoming the existing separations:

#### *a) Convergence on Baptism*

The ecumenical problem concerning baptism is related to the fact, that there are some churches who baptize infants while others would accept only adults for baptism or persons who can speak for themselves. The historical background for this fact is, that while in the NT we find clear reports only about adults who were baptized, very early already Christians began to baptize also children. It was only in the 16<sup>th</sup> century that this practice was questioned in a way that had an impact on a considerable number of people. The so-called Anabaptists on the basis of the fact that in the NT it is very clear that baptism is closely linked to faith<sup>4</sup> emphasized that in order to be baptized one should be able to confess one's faith. This led to many disputes within the different protestant groups. The traditional churches claimed, that there are places in the NT, from which the conclusion can be drawn that already at that time children were baptized<sup>5</sup>. The question is therefore: does a little child have faith? Martin Luther, for example, emphasized, that even an infant

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3 Originally 'convergence' is known from the field of mathematics, more specifically geometry: two parallel lines 'converge' towards a common point.

4 Cf. Mc 16:16; Acts 8:37; Acts 10:43ff. etc.

5 For ex. Acts 16:15: "When she and her whole household were baptized..." It can be presumed, that the 'household' included also the children.

has faith – not in the way of responding to God’s word, but as a gift of God.<sup>6</sup> This can only be understood on the background of his doctrine of justification: faith is a gift and salvation is a gift. This is expressed in the baptism of an infant, which can do nothing than receive God’s grace. Although the child cannot formulate its faith, it is enough that the parents and the congregation do this, acting for the child.

The theological difference behind these different practices is finally the understanding of faith: While the Lutheran position emphasizes the aspect of God’s gift, the position of those who baptize only believers points to the fact that God’s gift of faith needs an answer, and, therefore, one can speak of faith only, where there is a personal response.

How is BEM dealing with these differences? In the first part (chapter I) it talks about “The institution of Baptism”, which is not a problem between the churches. Chapter II talks about the meaning of baptism, namely: participation in Christ’s death and resurrection; conversion, pardoning and cleansing; gift of the Spirit; incorporation in the Body of Christ. Since these different meanings have a scriptural basis, there is a common understanding in this question. It is the following chapter (chapter III) which approaches the problem of “Baptism and Faith”. It is important to see, that there seems to be agreement on the close link between baptism and faith as such. The central paragraph of that chapter reads: *“Baptism is both God’s gift and our human response to that gift. It looks towards a growth into the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ (Eph. 4:13). The necessity of faith for the reception of the salvation embodied and set forth in baptism is acknowledged by all churches. Personal commitment is necessary for responsible membership in the body of Christ.”*<sup>7</sup> Although this statement is agreed by all the different traditions there is a different understanding of faith. In order to bring these different positions closer together the BEM text emphasizes to understand baptism not only as one event, but as a life-long growing: *“Baptism is related not only to momentary experience, but to life-long growth into Christ. Those baptized are called upon*

6 Cf. Edmund Schlink, *The Doctrine of Baptism*, Concordia London 1972, p. 144

7 BEM on Baptism Par.8.

*to reflect the glory of the Lord as they are transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit, into his likeness, with ever increasing splendor (2 Cor. 3:18). The life of the Christian is necessarily one of continuing experience of grace. ...”*<sup>8</sup>

From this conviction there are several consequences to be drawn in the different churches: Those who baptize small children, have to make sure, that the baptized take their call seriously. And those who baptize only believers should make sure, that it is clearly expressed, that baptism is God’s initiative. BEM therefore calls for a recognition of both forms of baptism, infant baptism as well as believers’ baptism. The text says in a commentary:

*“The practice of infant baptism emphasizes the corporate faith and the faith which the child shares with its parents. The infant is born into a broken world and shares in its brokenness. Through baptism, the promise and claim of the Gospel are laid upon the child. The personal faith of the recipient of baptism and faithful participation in the life of the Church are essential for the full fruit of baptism.*

*The practice of believers’ baptism emphasizes the explicit confession of the person who responds to the grace of God in and through the community of faith and who seeks baptism.*

*Both forms of baptism require a similar and responsible attitude towards Christian nurture. A rediscovery of the continuing character of Christian nurture may facilitate the mutual acceptance of different initiation practices.*

*In some churches which unite both infant-baptist and believer-baptist tradition, it has been possible to regard as equivalent alternatives for entry into the Church both a pattern whereby baptism in infancy is followed by later profession of faith and a pattern whereby believers’ baptism follows upon a presentation and blessing in infancy. This example invites other churches to decide whether they, too, could not recognize equivalent alternatives in their reciprocal relationships and in church union negotiations.”*<sup>9</sup>

8 BEM on Baptism par.9

9 BEM on Baptism, Commentary to par. 12.



The solution proposed by BEM is thus clear: 1. Both practices should be recognized, because they represent different emphases. 2. Mutual recognition of baptism should be expressed explicitly by the churches.<sup>10</sup>

**b) *Convergence on Eucharist***

There are mainly two problems involved in the ecumenical discussions on the Eucharist: One is the discussion which came up first between Lutherans and Catholics about the Eucharist being a sacrifice or not. The second is the question of the presence of Christ in the Eucharist, which can be briefly described in the following way: For the Roman Catholic theology the substance of the bread (or in this practice the host) and the wine are changed in a mysterious way into the substance of the body and the blood of Christ, while the exterior appearance is bread and wine. This is called "transubstantiation". In opposition to this the Lutherans hold the opinion, that bread and wine remain bread and wine in substance, but "in, with and under" bread and wine the body and blood of Christ is present.<sup>11</sup> The position of the Reformed (Zwinglians and Calvinists) goes a step further by saying, that bread and wine remain bread and wine, while Christ is present spiritually, and the celebration of the Eucharist is considered as a memorial meal. The question that arises is, whether one can here speak of the 'real presence' of Christ, on which Orthodox, Catholics, Anglicans, and even Lutherans would insist.

How does BEM deal with these different positions? As in the part on Baptism the text on the Eucharist first talks about the "Institution of the Eucharist" and then develops the "Meaning of the Eucharist". Those are: "The Eucharist as Thanksgiving to the Father"; "The Eucharist as Anamnesis or Memorial of Christ"; "The Eucharist as Invocation of the Spirit"; "The Eucharist as Communion of the Faithful"; "The Eucharist as Meal of the Kingdom". It is interesting that the document defines, among other things, the Eucharist as "Thanksgiving to the Father", and that in this context it is able to talk about the Eucharist as the "*great sacrifice of praise by which the*

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10 Cf. especially par. 15 and 16 of the text on Baptism in BEM

11 WA 6, 508

*Church speaks on behalf of the whole creation. For the world which God has reconciled is present at every Eucharist: in the bread and wine, in the persons of the faithful, and in the prayers they offer for themselves and for all people. Christ unites the faithful with himself and includes their prayers within his own intercession so that the faithful are transfigured and their prayers accepted. This sacrifice of praise is possible only through Christ, with him and in him. The bread and wine, fruits of the earth and of human labour, are presented to the Father in faith and thanksgiving. The Eucharist thus signifies what the world is to become: an offering and hymn of praise to the Creator, a universal communion in the body of Christ...".<sup>12</sup> This means, there is a sacrificial aspect in the Eucharist, which is a sacrifice of praise in the sense that those who partake in the Eucharist come before God and present their praise to him. In the background is obviously the practise of the early Christians, who came to the Eucharist bringing at that time natural gifts like fruits, etc., from which were taken the bread and the wine for the Eucharistic celebration while the rest was given to the poor. BEM, therefore, proposes in the commentary to this passage to understand the Catholic theology, which talks about "propitiatory sacrifice", in the light of the significance of the Eucharist as intercession.<sup>13</sup> It is clear that also in Roman-Catholic theology, the sacrifice is the unique sacrifice of the cross, which is made actual in the Eucharist and presented before the Father in the intercession of Christ and of the Church for all humanity.*

Thus, according to this document the differences in the understanding of the Eucharist are not really unbridgeable. All the churches have to reconsider their positions. This means for Protestants to reconsider any strict opposition to understand the Eucharist as a sacrifice, while Catholics and Orthodox would have to make clear that the Eucharist is not a repetition of the unique sacrifice of Christ. In this sense the different positions concerning the question of the Eucharist as a sacrifice would be brought closer together.

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12 BEM on Eucharist par.4

13 Cf. BEM on Eucharist Commentary 8

A similar result is found concerning the problem of the presence of Christ in the Eucharist. The document talks about the Eucharist as "the sacrament of his (=Christ's) real presence". But it does not define this presence in a more concrete way. It says only: "Christ's mode of presence in the Eucharist is unique."<sup>14</sup> And in a commentary the text explains, that there are different positions concerning this presence: "*Many churches believe that by the words of Jesus and by the power of the Holy Spirit, the bread and wine of the Eucharist become, in a real though mysterious manner, the body and blood of the risen Christ... Some other churches, while affirming a real presence of Christ at the Eucharist, do not link that presence so definitely with the signs of bread and wine*".<sup>15</sup> Then the text proposes: "*The decision remains for the churches whether this difference can be accommodated within the convergence formulated in the text itself*."<sup>16</sup> In other words, the text is asking the churches, whether they would agree with the statement that "Christ's mode of presence is unique"<sup>17</sup> and whether this agreement would be enough to recognise each other's Eucharist.

In summary BEM showed, that the question of the Eucharist as a sacrifice and the question of the presence of Christ in the Eucharist do not necessarily have to be divisive issues between the churches.

### c) *Convergence on Ministry*

Another issue which is a major obstacle for the mutual sharing of the Eucharist is the question of the ministry, namely the question about the celebrant of the Eucharist. For the Orthodox, the Roman-Catholic and the Anglican teachings the Eucharist can only be celebrated by a priest who has been ordained by a bishop who on his side has been ordained within the line of the so-called apostolic succession, meaning a succession of laying on of hands for bishops' ordinations which goes back to the apostles. Most churches coming

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14 BEM on Eucharist par. 13

15 BEM on Eucharist Commentary 13

16 Ibidem

17 Cf. footnote 8

from the Reformation lost this succession at the moment when they started to ordain priests or pastors through ordinary priests or even through lay people.<sup>18</sup>

How does BEM try to solve the problem? BEM tries to re-define “apostolic succession” in a wider sense. It is not just the line of laying on of hands, but apostolic succession is the fact that a church has kept the tradition of the teaching of the apostles and is in this sense succeeding the apostles. For this the text refers to the Creed, in which “the Church confesses itself to be apostolic”.<sup>19</sup> Therefore it can be said: *“The primary manifestation of apostolic succession is to be found in the apostolic tradition of the Church as a whole. The succession is an expression of the permanence and, therefore, of the continuity of Christ’s own mission in which the Church participates”*.<sup>20</sup> This is further explained in a commentary<sup>21</sup> and it is proposed, that *“a distinction should be made, therefore, between the apostolic tradition of the whole church and the succession of the apostolic ministry”*, which can be called ‘episcopal succession’. The text then states, that *“within the Church the ordained ministry has a particular task of preserving and actualizing the apostolic faith”*. Therefore it is admitted, that *“the orderly transmission of the ordained ministry is therefore a powerful expression of the continuity of the Church throughout the history; ...Where churches see little importance in orderly transmission, they should ask themselves whether they have not to change their conception of continuity in the apostolic tradition. On the other hand, where the ordained ministry does not adequately serve the proclamation of the apostolic faith, churches must ask themselves whether their ministerial structures are not in need of reform”*.<sup>22</sup>

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18 Only some Lutheran churches such as the Church of Finland or the Church of Sweden kept the episcopal succession.

19 BEM on Ministry Par. 34

20 BEM on Ministry Par.35

21 BEM on Ministry, Commentary 34

22 BEM on MInistry Par. 35



This means in fact that the churches could finally recognize each other's ministry if those churches, which have now linked the apostolic succession closely with the episcopal succession could accept, that those churches which have not kept the episcopal succession, have nevertheless kept the tradition of the apostles and are therefore in apostolic succession. On the other hand the text proposes to those churches which do not have the sign of the laying on of hands by a bishop, to introduce this as a visible sign for their being in the apostolic succession.<sup>23</sup> In this way, the churches would come closer together and all 'sides' involved would have to change something.

## The Reception of BEM

### Definition of 'reception'

Before talking concretely about the reception of BEM by the churches, we need to reflect briefly in general on 'reception' and what it implies. As Mary Tanner said: "reception is a long-range and far-reaching process in which the whole church seeks to recognize and affirm confidently the one faith..."<sup>24</sup> The reception of ecumenical

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23 Cf. BEM on Ministry, par. 53: „In order to achieve mutual recognition, different steps are required of different churches. For example: a) Churches which have preserved the Episcopal succession are asked to recognize both the apostolic content of the ordained ministry which exists in churches which have not maintained such succession and also the existence in these churches of a ministry of *episcopé* in various forms. b) Churches without the Episcopal succession, and living in faithful continuity with the apostolic faith and mission, have a ministry of Word and sacrament, as is evident from the belief, practice, and life of those churches. These churches are asked to realize that the continuity with the Church of the apostles finds profound expression in the successive laying on of hands by bishops and that, though they may not lack the continuity of the apostolic tradition, this sign will strengthen and deepen that continuity. They may need to recover the sign of the episcopal succession.”

24 Mary Tanner, "The Effect of Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry on the Church of England", in: Thomas F. Best and Tamara Grdzeldze (eds.), *BEM at 25. Critical Insights into a continuing legacy*, WCC Publications Geneva 2007, pp.138-152, p.140.

texts is taking place on different levels: there is an official level, for example through an official response; then there is the local level, where such a document is being discussed and studied. But there is also the fact to be considered, that neither an official response nor a study process can guarantee that the contents of such documents are really received. Reception is an ongoing process and can be really received probably only years later, when it becomes clear, whether the proposals or agreements of such a text have been implemented and put into practise. As William G. Rush formulated it: "We can now develop...a preliminary definition of the term 'ecumenical reception'...we can define it to include *all phases and aspects of an ongoing process by which a church under the guidance of God's Spirit makes the results of a bilateral or multilateral conversation a part of its faith and life because the results are seen to be in conformity, that is, the gospel as witnessed to in Scripture.*"<sup>25</sup>

On this background we will look into the reception process of BEM from different perspectives: official responses, local studies, implementation and changes within churches and in the relationship between churches.

#### **a) Official Responses to BEM**

The BEM document was sent to all the member churches of the World Council of Churches including the Roman Catholic Church. They were asked to react to it and give official responses to a number of questions, the most important of which was "to know as precisely as possible the extent to which your church can recognise in this text the faith of the Church through the ages".<sup>26</sup> It was also asked which consequences the churches would draw from this text. The result was a number of about 179 responses from churches worldwide.<sup>27</sup>

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25 William B. Rush, Reception. An Ecumenical Opportunity, The Lutheran World Federation Geneva 1988, p. 31.

26 Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry, F&O paper No. 111, WCC Publications, Geneva 1982, p.X.

27 These responses are published in six volumes *Churches Respond to*

These responses appreciated the text in general in a quite positive way.<sup>28</sup> But looking into the concrete issues it turns out, that in fact all the churches found points, with which they did not agree, or where they did not find their concerns expressed in an appropriate way. I will give here a few examples of crucial issues related to the main questions which I highlighted above:

(i) The main idea of BEM's part on baptism, that the two practices of infant and believers' baptism should be considered as two different practices of the same one baptism was rejected especially by Baptist churches.<sup>29</sup> They thought that “the text has too easily settled for compromise and too easily dismissed a fundamental incompatibility between infant and adult believer's baptism. They detected a theological difficulty in maintaining one baptism in two different forms.”<sup>30</sup>

(ii) Concerning the eucharist the official responses show “a very widespread willingness to agree in the confession of ‘Christ's real, living and active presence’, as affirmed in the Lima text.”<sup>31</sup> But at the same time, some churches – especially from the wider protestant family –, find, that it is not clearly enough said in BEM, that this presence does not mean transubstantiation, while the Roman Catholic Church in its response insists, that “the content of the word ‘transubstantiation’ ought to be expressed without ambiguity”<sup>32</sup>. In a

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*BEM*, Vol. I-VI, ed. by Max Thurian, WCC Publications 1986, 1987, 1988, F&O papers No. 129, 132, 135, 137, 143, 144.

28 Cf. *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry 1982-1990*. Report on the Process and Responses, F&O paper No. 149, WCC Publications, Geneva 1990, p.17.

29 Cf. *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry 1982-1990*. Report on the Process and Responses, Faith & Order Paper No. 149, WCC Publications Geneva 1990, p.46.

30 Ibidem

31 Ibid. p. 56

32 Responses VI,22; quoted in: *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry 1982-1990*, p.64.

similar way we find in the responses concerning the question of the presence of Christ in the eucharist, that the different churches emphasize missing aspects from their own confessional point of view.<sup>33</sup>

(iii) "The distinction (not separation) between 'apostolic Tradition' and 'succession of the Apostolic ministry' ... has been widely accepted in the responses as an important ecumenical step forward in the difficult issue of 'apostolic succession'."<sup>34</sup> But for most of the Orthodox and also the Roman Catholic Church "apostolic tradition" and "apostolic ministry" are "inextricably bound up"<sup>35</sup>. They "emphasize that the character of Episcopal succession as a guarantee and 'effective sign' must be safeguarded as a condition for unity and recognition of ministry".<sup>36</sup> Most of the Reformation churches on the other hand "cannot see that the validity of ministerial acts performed by ordained persons is dependent on being able to trace back to the first apostles a formal succession of the laying on of hands."<sup>37</sup>

From these examples, which could be extended to other points raised by BEM it becomes clear, that the churches in their responses read the BEM text through the lenses of their own tradition, judging it according to the criteria of their own confessional points of view. This fact is not astonishing as such, it rather shows, that on the official and doctrinal level the churches were not able to bring their own view into a relation to the views of other dialogue partners in the ecumenical endeavour in such a way, that would have brought them closer together. In consequence today we have to state, that if we

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33 Cf. *Ibid.* pp. 65ff.

34 *Ibid.* p.83

35 Response of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, II,22f, cf. also Response of the Finnish Orthodox Church, II,28f; of the Russian Orthodox Church, II,7; of the Romanian Orthodox Church, III,13; of the Orthodox Church in America, III,23. Quoted in *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry 1982-1990*, p.84.

36 *Ibid.*

37 Quotation from the response of the Church of Norway (II,121) in *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry 1982-1990*, p.84.



look at the separating lines between the major Christian traditions (Orthodox, Roman Catholic and Reformation churches) BEM was not able to change much.

***b) The Wider Reception of BEM on the Local Level***

On the other hand the general picture or map of the reception of BEM worldwide shows a big variety. In general one can state, that BEM has widely spread and discussed within the Western European and North American continents. For example in Germany, I can tell from my own experience, that BEM was discussed not only on the level of theological commissions of the church leadership, but also in theological faculties (including professors and students ) and even in parish groups. “BEM had an impact not only on the theological understanding of baptism, eucharist and ministry, but also on the concrete ways in which the congregations celebrated the Lord’s supper and looked at the role of the minister in all aspects of worship, witness and service of the church”, a German pastor writes. His parish for example “revisited its stance concerning the baptism of children and adults...the parish began to look at the Trinitarian dimension of the eucharist and gave new emphasis to *anamnesis* and *epiklesis*...”<sup>38</sup> As Mary Tanner points out for the Church of England and the Anglican Communion, BEM “has proved itself to be a *convergence instrument*, affecting the life and witness” of the two. “BEM had a notable influence on the revision of the Church of England’s *liturgical texts*, not least of all on its Eucharistic prayers.”<sup>39</sup> And with this effect within one church, BEM influenced also the relationship between different churches on the local level.<sup>40</sup>

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38 Martin Robra, “Ecclesiology and Ethics – An Example of Global-Local Dynamics”, in: Thomas F. Best and Tamara Grdzeldze (eds.), *BEM at 25. Critical Insights into a continuing legacy*, Faith & Order Paper No. 205, WCC Publications Geneva 2007, pp. 229-239, p. 230.

39 Mary Tanner, “The Effect of Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry on the Church of England”, in: Thomas F. Best and Tamara Grdzeldze (eds.), *BEM at 25. Critical Insights into a continuing Legacy*, WCC Publications Geneva 2007, pp. 137-150, p. 141.

40 Cf. Ibid. p. 145f.

The picture is quite different though in Eastern Europe and especially within the Orthodox churches. As Gennadios of Sassima (Limouris) points out “in the Orthodox world the document was largely placed as *terra incognita* or *mysterion*, something which is not to be touched, or at best a matter for specialists.”<sup>41</sup> And more strongly: “The fact is that, despite the theological convergences contained in the Lima texts, the Orthodox churches will never be able to accept them in their entirety.”<sup>42</sup> It becomes clear at this point, that the Orthodox have a different understanding of ‘reception’ compared to the one defined above by a Lutheran and an Anglican theologian. For them “there can be no question of using the term ‘reception’ in relation to BEM in the same sense as the reception of the decisions of the Ecumenical Councils and Synods in the early centuries of the Church’s history.”<sup>43</sup>

Again a different picture is presented if we look at the churches from the global South. In fact there were very few official responses from Southern churches among the 179 published in the mentioned volumes. The reasons for this are manifold: A lot of these churches at that time were not yet independent from their respective mother churches in the North. But there are also some other problems, which Jesse N.K. Mugambi<sup>44</sup> analyzes: “At both ecumenical and denominational levels mainstream African ecclesiastical structures do not have the institutional capacity for such two-way feedback.”<sup>45</sup> At the same time there is already a fundamental difference in the questions asked by BEM and the churches in the South: “Doctrinal consensus was sought (in BEM) and recorded more on the basis of

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41 Gennadios of Sassima, “Memory Against Forgetting – the BEM Document After Twenty-Five Years’, in: Thomas F. Best and Tamara Grdzeliidze (eds.), *BEM at 25*, pp.153-183, p. 164.

42 Ibid. p. 165.

43 Gennadios of Sassima, *Memory*, p. 168

44 Jesse N.K. Mugambi, “Some Problems of Authority and Credibility in the Drafting and Reception Processes of the BEM Document”, in: Thomas F. Best and Tamara Grdzeliidze, *BEM at 25*, p.185-201.

45 Ibid. p.186.

the traditions within the confessional families than on convergence in the discernment of New Testament insights and teachings. The fact is that while in the North Atlantic denominational and cultural identities often coincide, in Africa they do not."<sup>46</sup> Therefore "the majority of Christians (especially in tropical Africa) can hardly identify themselves with the document's doctrinal formulation and theological justifications."<sup>47</sup>

Despite this rather divergent picture we can observe today a very significant development especially in one of the issues raised by BEM: During the last few years in several countries local churches moved towards an official mutual recognition of each others baptism. While in England already since the 1990s different churches – including Baptist churches - use a common baptismal certificate, in 2007 a statement on mutual recognition of baptism was signed between different churches in Germany<sup>48</sup>, including Protestant, Orthodox, Roman Catholic, some Oriental Orthodox and Methodist churches<sup>49</sup>. Also in 2007 an agreement concerning baptism was signed in Brazil by the Roman Catholic Church, the Episcopal Church, the Lutheran Church, the Presbyterian Church and the Syrian Orthodox Church.<sup>50</sup>

All these steps are based in some way or the other on the work of BEM.

### *c) Reception of BEM in Bilateral Dialogues*

Maybe the most visible influence of BEM can be traced in some bilateral dialogues. The first example is the so called Porvoo Common

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46 Ibid. p.187f.

47 Ibid. p.191.

48 The English text will be published later this year in: Thomas F. Best, *On Baptism*, WCC Publications Geneva 2008.

49 The Baptists and Mennonites did not sign the document, but joined in the celebration as a sign for their ecumenical solidarity.

50 The text can be found under the title „Ato de Reconhecimento mútuo da Administração do Sacramento do Batismo” on the website of the National Council of Churches in Brazil, CONIC under: [www.conic.org.br/pub](http://www.conic.org.br/pub)

Statement between the British and Irish Anglican Churches and the Nordic and Baltic Lutheran Churches.<sup>51</sup> In this agreement these churches are able to “acknowledge one another’s churches as churches belonging to the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church of Jesus Christ and truly participating in the apostolic mission of the whole people of God.”<sup>52</sup> Consequently they also “acknowledge, that in all our churches the Word of God is authentically preached , and the sacraments of baptism and the eucharist are duly administered; ...acknowledge that all our churches share in the common confession of the apostolic faith; ...acknowledge that one another’s ordained ministries are given by God as instruments of his grace and as possessing not only the inward call of the Spirit, but also Christ’s commission through his body, the Church;”<sup>53</sup> On this basis they “commit” themselves among other things “to welcome one another’s members to receive sacramental and other pastoral ministrations;” and “to welcome persons episcopally ordained in any of our churches to the office of bishop, priest or deacon to serve, by invitation and in accordance with any regulations which may from time to time be in force, in that ministry in the receiving church without re-ordination.”<sup>54</sup> This means in addition to a shared eucharist also the mutual recognition of ministries.

In view of the fact that the Church of Norway for example did not have the episcopal succession it was only possible to come to such an agreement because this church accepted the agreement “to invite one another’s bishops normally to participate in the laying on of hands at the ordination of bishops as a sign of the unity and continuity of the Church.”<sup>55</sup> In other words: The Church of Norway accepted to introduce the episcopal laying on of hands as a sign for its

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51 Published in: *Together in Mission and Ministry. The Porvoo Common Statement with Essays on Church and Ministry in Northern Europe*, Church House Publishing London 1993

52 Ibidem p.30

53 Ibid.

54 Ibid. p.31

55 Ibid.



apostolicity, while the Anglican partners recognised the apostolicity of the Church of Norway as a whole. This is in fact a realization of the proposal made by BEM in the part on Ministry, as described above<sup>56</sup>.

A quite similar agreement on full communion is the so called “Waterloo Declaration between the National Convention of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada and the General Synod of the Anglican Church of Canada”, signed in 2001.<sup>57</sup> Using similar language as and mostly referring to the Porvoo Statement the two churches acknowledge each other.<sup>58</sup> On this basis the “Anglican Church of Canada ... recognizes the full authenticity of the ordained ministries of bishops and pastors presently existing within the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada, acknowledging its pastors as priests in the Church of God and its bishops as bishops and chief pastors exercising a ministry of episcopate over the jurisdictional areas of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada in which they preside” while “the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada ... recognizes the full authenticity of the ordained ministries of bishops, priests, and deacons presently existing within the Anglican Church of Canada, acknowledging its priests as pastors in the Church of God and its bishops as bishops and chief pastors exercising a ministry of episcopate over the jurisdictional areas of the Anglican Church of Canada in which they preside.” “The Anglican Church of Canada and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada affirm each other’s expression of episcopal ministry as a sign of continuity and unity in apostolic faith.” As in the case of the Church of Norway in the Porvoo Agreement, also the Lutheran Church in Canada accepted to introduce the laying on of hands for the ordination of their bishops through the participation of Anglican bishops as a sign for the apostolicity of the church, while the Anglican Church recognizes the apostolicity of the Lutheran Church.

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56 Cf. footnote 23

57 <http://elcic.ca/What-We-Believe/Waterloo-Declaration.cfm>

58 Par. 1-5

Already in 1999 the Episcopal Church in the USA and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) signed a common agreement on "Called to Common Mission", in which the ELCA accepted also to introduce the Episcopal succession: "In order to receive the historic episcopate, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America pledges that, following the adoption of this Concordat and in keeping with the collegiality and continuity of ordained ministry attested as early as Canon 4 of the First Ecumenical Council (Nicaea I, a.d. 325), at least three bishops already sharing in the sign of the episcopal succession will be invited to participate in the installation of its next Presiding Bishop through prayer for the gift of the Holy Spirit and with the laying-on-of-hands. These participating bishops will be invited from churches of the Lutheran communion which share in the historic episcopate. In addition, a bishop or bishops will be invited from The Episcopal Church to participate in the same way as a symbol of the full communion now shared. Synodical bishops elected and awaiting installation may be similarly installed at the same service, if they wish. Further, all other installations of bishops in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America will be through prayer for the gift of the Holy Spirit and with the laying-on-of-hands by other bishops, at least three of whom are to be in the historic succession (see paragraph 12 above). Its liturgical rites will reflect these provisions".<sup>59</sup>

These three examples are the only ones, in which it was possible to put BEM's proposal into practice. As we notice: all the three cases involve Anglicans and Lutherans. But there are other examples, which show, that the solution proposed by BEM does not work in all bilateral relations. The dialogue between the Church of England and the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD) was not able to go as far as Porvoo: the question of ministry still needs to be resolved. Especially for the Reformed churches the proposal of BEM to introduce the laying on of hands of bishops is not acceptable. Therefore the dialogue between the British and Irish Anglican Churches and the French Lutheran and Reformed Churches, known as *the Reuilly-Common*

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59 <http://archive.elca.org/ecumenical/fullcommunion/episcopal/ccmresources/text.html#A>, par. 19.

*Statement*<sup>60</sup> which uses practically the same language as the Porvoo Statement concerning the acknowledgements is different in terms of the ordained ministry. The text says: "We acknowledge that one another's ordained ministries are given by God as instruments of grace for the mission and unity of the Church and for the proclamation of the word and the celebration of the sacraments... We acknowledge one another's ordained ministries as possessing not only the inward call of the Spirit but also Christ's commission through the Church, and look forward to the time when the fuller visible unity of our churches makes possible the interchangeability of ministers."<sup>61</sup> Although the "belonging to the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church of Jesus Christ" of both sides is recognized the fact that they are "truly participating in the apostolic mission of the whole people of God"<sup>62</sup> did in this case not lead to a mutual recognition of ministries because the Reformed side did not see itself in a position to accept to introduce the episcopal succession.<sup>63</sup>

### The Further Process

Although the formal process of official responses to BEM came to an end already years ago, the wider process of reception is not finished. BEM is still a resource for bilateral dialogues on all levels as well as for the multilateral dialogue going on in the Commission on Faith and Order of the WCC.

The analysis of the responses to BEM made it clear, that further work of Faith and Order would have to concentrate on ecclesiology.<sup>64</sup>

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60 Published in: *Called to Witness and Service. The Reuilly Common Statement with Essays on Church, Eucharist and Ministry*, Church House Publishing. London 1999.

61 Ibidem, pp.36f.

62 Ibid. p.36

63 It can only be mentioned briefly here, that the Reformed and the Lutheran Churches in Europe found a way to establish full communion which takes a direction that is different from Porvoo and the proposal of BEM, while not dealing with the question of episcopal succession.

64 Cf. *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry 1982-1990*, pp. 147-151

Therefore the fifth World Conference on Faith and Order at Santiago de Compostela in 1993 recommended to do a study in this area, which was then decided by the Standing Commission of Faith and Order. The idea is that this study should lead to another convergence document. In 2005 as an interim result a draft text was published under the title "The Nature and Mission of the Church"<sup>65</sup>. This text takes up the results of BEM and puts them into the wider context of the understanding of the church. The church being defined as creation of the Word and the Holy Spirit as one, holy, catholic and apostolic is described on the basis of the biblical images as the people of God, the body of Christ, the temple of the Holy Spirit and as koinonia/communion. The text highlights the mission of the church and the church as an instrument of God's intention and plan for the world. On this background the question how the church can fulfil its mission in the best way becomes crucial, and thus the question of unity has a critical function for the life of the church in history. "Diversity in unity and unity in diversity are gifts of God to the Church... There is a rich diversity of Christian life and witness born out of the diversity of cultural and historical context. The Gospel has to be rooted and lived authentically in each and every place. It has to be proclaimed in language, symbols and images that engage with and are relevant to, particular times and particular contexts. ... Authentic diversity in the life of communion must not be stifled: authentic unity must not be surrendered. Each local church must be the place where two things are simultaneously guaranteed: the safeguarding of unity and the flourishing of a legitimate diversity."<sup>66</sup> One of the key questions "The Nature and Mission of the Church" is asking therefore is: where are the limits of diversity?

Another important aspect highlighted by this document in consequence of being an instrument of God's plan is the ethical aspect of the church and its life: "The Church is the community of people called by God who, through the Holy Spirit, are united with Jesus

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65 *The Nature and Mission of the Church. A Stage on the Way to a Common Statement*, Faith & Order Paper No. 198, WCC Geneva 2005

66 Parr. 60-62



Christ and sent as disciples to bear witness to God's reconciliation, healing and transformation of creation."<sup>67</sup>

"The Nature and Mission of the Church" is considered as "a Stage on the Way to a Common Statement". It has been sent to the member churches of the WCC for responses, in order to see, whether it "reflects an emerging convergence"<sup>68</sup> At present it is being studied in the churches and the Commission of Faith and Order is collecting the incoming responses. It is hoped, that by 2013 a final convergence text can be presented.

Another area coming from BEM, in which Faith and Order did further work during the last years, was the issue of baptism. It looked into the question of inculturation of baptism thus taking up the question of cultural diversity and problems arising with the coming into existence of new churches, especially in the South<sup>69</sup>. It also emphasized the ethical implications of baptism as a possible starting point for the question of mutual recognition of baptism.<sup>70</sup> This question is still being pursued further. A preliminary document is published on the internet.<sup>71</sup>

## Conclusion

This article tried to show that BEM was a breakthrough in the multilateral theological ecumenical discussions. It helped the churches to see their common ground in a clearer way. At the same time it made clear the still existing differences. BEM had a big impact in the liturgical and spiritual life of a lot of churches, and in this sense brought churches closer together. This found its expression in some bilateral agreements on church communion. But looking at the wider picture,

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67 Par. 111

68 *The Nature and Mission of the Church*, p. 12

69 Cf. Thomas F. Best and Dagmar Heller (eds.), *Becoming a Christian. The Ecumenical Implications of Our Common Baptism*, Faith & Order Paper No. 184, WCC Geneva 1999

70 *Ibid.*, pp. 65ff.

71 <http://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/wcc-commissions/faith-and-order-commission/ii-worship-and-baptism/one-baptism-towards-mutual-recognition-a-text-in-progress.html>

the situation of the theological relations between the churches has not been changed along the lines of divisions between the major church traditions. Further work needs to be done, especially in the wider field of ecclesiology.

For this undertaking it needs to be taken into account that the ecclesial landscape – not only in terms of membership in the WCC – has considerably changed, especially through the appearance of new churches (e.g. Pentecostals) and even new types of churches such as African Instituted Churches. These are new challenges especially in the field of ecclesiology, which call also for new methodologies and even a new reflection on the goal of visible unity. The BEM process and its further development have shown that unity cannot be understood as uniformity and cannot be a re-unification. The diversity among the churches is growing and will be growing. The crucial question is to come to a common understanding of how unity can be preserved or re-established despite diversity.

# Catholic – Orthodox Dialogue: Some Personal Glimpses

**K. M. George\***

The theological dialogue between the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox Churches, both Eastern and Oriental, since the 1970s have been successful to a great extent in dissipating the ancient prejudices and many a doctrinal misunderstanding on both sides. However, the crucial issues for which no mutually acceptable solution has emerged are the Roman Catholic notions of Petrine primacy, authority and succession and its ecclesiological implications such as the Roman concepts of the Universal Church and Universal Pastor. This is opposed to the undivided Church's concepts of qualitative Catholicity and Local Church Ecclesiology according to the Orthodox understanding. Since the goal of the dialogue is the restoration of eucharistic communion between the Eastern and Western churches in one apostolic faith and mutual love in Christ, we need to reflect together on these divisive issues with greater mutual respect and genuine hope in the guidance of the Holy Spirit. In any case the "Uniatist" method once employed by the Roman catholic Church with regard to the Orthodox Churches is totally obnoxious to the latter.

Let me begin with a personal note.

It was a great privilege for me to be invited as one of the four 'fraternal delegates' to the Asian Bishops Synod held at the Vatican

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in 1998. On the last day of the Synod that met to prepare for the new millennium, Pope John Paul II gave a farewell lunch to all the Synod fathers, theologians and guests. The host at the round table to which I was assigned was Cardinal Ratzinger, then head of the Sacred Congregation of the Doctrine of Faith. I don't know if any of the four others seated at our table had any inkling that the German Cardinal would be seated on Peter's throne in the new millennium as Benedict XVI. I for myself least suspected it.

Sharing the food with us and engaging us in light-hearted table talk, he soon dispelled my previous image of a harsh and distant custodian of Catholic doctrine.

Humbly aware of sitting next to the foremost authority of Roman Catholic doctrine of faith, I ventured to clear some of my doubts. One of my questions to the Cardinal was somewhat like this: "Your Eminence, we have had several rounds of official and un-official theological dialogues between the Catholic Church and the Orthodox Churches. It appears to many who participated in these dialogues that all the classical theological issues between our two traditions may eventually be dealt with in favour of unity except one. This one exception is the Roman Catholic position on *Petrine primacy* and its ecclesiological implications. Do you think we can find a way out?"

He gave me a benign smile, and answered crisply: 'Let's share it'. With this aphoristic answer, he disarmed me completely.

Later on I had many occasions to mull over the enigmatic words of the future Pope though this must have been a totally insignificant and casual piece of conversation in the life of a world leader like Benedict XVI. What did Cardinal Ratzinger mean when he said 'Let's share it'. Did he mean that the Apostle Peter's primacy, authority and succession, cardinal points of Roman Catholic ecclesiology vis-à-vis Orthodox ecclesiology, can be shared between the Catholic Church and the Orthodox Churches? Thus, on the one hand, what would probably be the *modus operandi* of this sharing? But on the other hand, would the Orthodox Churches wish at all to share in any way the Roman Catholic Petrine principles as pivotal points in a future unity. Would any kind of sharing in Petrine theology be the means to crack the hard nut between the West and the East?



The idea of sharing struck me again in another incident. In January 2008, I went to Rome as a member of the International Joint Working Group (JWG) between the Roman Catholic Church and the Geneva-based World Council of Churches. The first meeting of the JWG after the Porto Alegre Assembly of WCC was hosted by the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity (PCPCU). Pope Benedict XVI received us in audience and expressed keen interest in our discussions. The meeting coincided with the Week for Christian Unity jointly organized by the PCPCU of the Vatican and the Faith and Order Commission of the WCC.

As part of the celebration of the unity week, Benedict XVI invited us to an ecumenical Evening Prayer service presided over by the Pope at the St. Paul's Basilica Outside the Walls. Seated with him in the sanctuary was Dr. Samuel Kobia, General Secretary of the WCC who delivered the sermon.

This incident was apparently without precedent. It was the first time that a Protestant Church leader was invited to preach in one of the Papal basilicas in Rome when the Pope himself was present.

This again was a significant event that illustrated to me the Pope's point of 'sharing' though this could be a very subjective interpretation on my part.

### **Mutual Respect and Recognition**

The Roman Catholic Church's position regarding the Orthodox Churches and the Protestant Churches is not the same. In spite of the rift between Rome and the East, and their mutual anathemas the inner feeling on both sides was that they recognized each other's apostolic tradition. The Eastern Tradition unanimously and consistently charged the Western Church of deviating from the path of orthodoxy or true faith of the Apostolic Church through the later Western formulations of Petrine theology, papal titles like Vicar of Christ, and Universal Pastor, doctrinal innovations like Filioque (regarding the procession of the Holy Spirit thus unilaterally altering the Creed of Nicea), clerical celibacy, papal infallibility, Marian doctrines of Assumption and Immaculate conception and so on. On the other hand, the Roman Catholic Church found no ground to make serious

accusation of doctrinal heresy on the part of the Orthodox Churches. The major Roman charge against the Orthodox or Eastern Churches is that they 'broke away' from communion with the Bishop of Rome, Vicar of Christ, Successor of Peter and the Head of the Universal Church. As late as the papal encyclical *Ut Unum Sint* of John Paul II this is expressed in words like 'the Orthodox Churches are wounded' because of their separate existence from communion with the Bishop of Rome. In fact in liturgical matters the Roman Church always looked up to the Orthodox as embodying the apostolic tradition. For example, recently the Roman Catholic Church has recognized the ancient tradition of giving eucharistic communion to children soon after baptism and Chrismation as preserved in Orthodox theology and practice. In spite of the mutual accusations in the course of history the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox Churches kept a high degree of mutual respect and recognition as sharing essentially in the same apostolic tradition (without minimizing in anyway the gravity of later Roman doctrines) in spite of divergences in perspectives and practices. This is a fruitful ground for dialogue in our times.

In this brief article, the reference to the Orthodox Churches or Orthodox Tradition is made in a broad sense covering both families of the Orthodox Churches. A word about these two families may be helpful to some readers:

### **Two Families of Orthodox Churches**

The Orthodox churches are generally grouped into two families – the Eastern and the Oriental. It was in the twentieth-century ecumenical context that the expressions 'Eastern' and 'Oriental' were routinely used to distinguish the two families. 'Eastern' refers to the family of churches in the Byzantine liturgical tradition in communion with the see of Constantinople (Ecumenical Patriarchate), like the churches of Greece, Cyprus, Russia, Rumania, Bulgaria and so on. These are the Orthodox churches which accept the seven Ecumenical Councils as of fundamental doctrinal and canonical importance. They share the same liturgical texts and practices. Sometimes these churches are referred to by the other family of Oriental Orthodox churches as the Chalcedonian Orthodox since the Council of Chalcedon in 451, the fourth ecumenical council for the Eastern Orthodox, was the point of separation for the Oriental Orthodox.

The other family, namely the Oriented Orthodox, consists of the Armenian, the Coptic, the Ethiopian, the Indian (Malankara) and the Syrian churches. Very recently, in the aftermath of the political division between Ethiopia and Eritrea, a separate church called the Eritrean Orthodox Church, formerly part of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, was created.

The main conflict between the families was in the area of Christology – how the divine and the human natures were united in the person of Jesus Christ. However, strong political, cultural and social factors also played a part. The differences resulted in the breach of communion between these two Eastern families which, in spite of separation, maintain to this day a remarkable unity in theological-ecclesiological approach, liturgical-spiritual ethos and general church discipline.

The Christological differences between these two families were resolved in a series of unofficial and official dialogues between the two families since 1967. Both families now acknowledge each other as holding the same apostolic faith in spite of the Christological misunderstandings in the distant past. What is interesting to us is that these two families, though separated for about 1500 years since Chalcedon, maintained the same ecclesiology. In spite of the Christological disputes around the Chalcedonian definition the Oriental Orthodox have accepted the disciplinary canons of Chalcedon that pertained to ecclesiological issues.

As the result of the unofficial dialogue, a consensus emerged. Both sides could affirm together “the common tradition of the one church in all important matters – liturgy and spirituality, doctrine and canonical practice, in our understanding of the Holy Trinity, of the incarnation, of the person and work of the Holy Spirit, on the nature of the Church as the communion of saints with its ministry and sacraments, and on the life of the world to come when our Lord and Saviour shall come in all his glory” (Geneva, 1970).

The official dialogue confirmed this (Egypt, 1989): “We have inherited from our fathers in Christ the one apostolic faith and tradition, though as churches we have been separated from each other for

centuries. As two families of Orthodox Churches long out of communion with each other, we now pray and trust in God to restore that communion on the basis of the apostolic faith of the undivided Church of the first centuries which we confess in our common creed”.

In all matters related to issues with ecclesiological implications in the WCC and the modern ecumenical movement in general, both families maintain the same position. The issue of ecclesiology was behind the creation in 1998 of the Special Commission on Orthodox Participation in the WCC and the changes that resulted from the Commission’s work with regard to the self-understanding, style and perspective of the WCC.

This became possible largely because of the solidarity of the two families of Orthodox churches and their common ground and shared perspective in ecclesiology as the key issue in ecumenism.

The Byzantine or Eastern Orthodox Tradition centered at Constantinople and the Latin Tradition centred at Rome formally separated from each other in 1054 on the issue of the *filioque*, or addition, by Rome to the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, of the words *from the son* (*filioque*) regarding the procession of the Holy Spirit. The break between the Roman Church and the Oriental Orthodox had already happened at the Council of Chalcedon (451) around the Christological issue of the nature of the incarnate Christ. There the Latins and the Greeks stood together over against the Orientals.

However, both families of Orthodox Churches maintained more or less the same theological attitude vis-à-vis the Roman Church ever since the separation.

### **Contemporary Dialogue**

Well before the Vatican set up formal dialogue commission with the Oriental Churches, Cardinal Koenig of Vienna of Blessed memory founded the Pro Oriente Foundation with a great vision and genuine sensitivity to the Eastern Churches. The Foundation started the process of an in-depth theological dialogue in the 1970s. The unofficial consultations between theologians of the Roman Catholic Church and the Oriental Orthodox Churches took up all the historical-



theological issues from Chalcedonian Christology in the 5<sup>th</sup> century that separated our Churches to questions of uniatism and exercise of Primatial authority today. Published in the journal *Wort und Wahrheit*, these dialogues brought together eminent theologians and scholars from both sides.

The impressive array of topics and issues dealt with in these consultations and the loving, generous and scholarly spirit in which they were held in the first cycle made a lasting contribution to the ecumenical dialogue between the Roman Catholic Church and the Oriental Churches. The quality and scope of that dialogue are a tribute to the greatness of Cardinal Koenig as well.

Once the Vatican took up the dialogues on a more official level, we could build on the foundation solidly laid by the Vienna Consultations. It should be said to the credit of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity and its leaders and officers from Cardinal Willebrands to Cardinal Kasper that they have taken up the dialogue with the Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox Churches with utmost care, sensitivity, diligence and love. These great efforts will not be lost. All those who are involved in it fervently hope that the Holy Spirit will bring it up to bear fruit for glory of God.

Formal dialogue between the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox Churches began in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century inspired by the ecumenical spirit of Vatican II in the 1960s and the dialogue initiatives of the World Council of Churches founded in 1948. Numerous local, national and regional dialogues both bilateral and multilateral, in which the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox Churches were involved, have taken place during the last four decades.

At present, in addition to the various ongoing bilateral dialogues between RCC and the local Orthodox Churches, two major official dialogue commissions with similar format and agenda are working, namely.

- a. Joint International Commission for Theological dialogue between the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church.
- b. International Joint Commission for Theological Dialogue between the Roman Catholic Church and the Oriental Orthodox Churches.

The first one brings together all the local Orthodox Churches in the Byzantine family while the second one gathers together the local Churches in the Oriental Orthodox family in dialogue with the Roman Catholic Church.

Simultaneously with these encounters, some members of both families have ongoing bilateral dialogue with the Roman Catholic Church. For example, the ongoing *Joint International Commission for Dialogue between the Catholic Church and the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church*, (under the Catholicate of the East, Devalokam, Kottayam) has begun work in 1989, long before the above-mentioned international commission was set up with the Oriental Orthodox family and the Catholic Church in 2004.

### **Present Concerns**

1. In the understanding of the Orthodox Churches restoring eucharistic communion between the divided churches is the major goal of all ecumenical theological dialogue. Communion in the one Body of Christ in one apostolic faith and mutual love is the chief expression of the visible unity of Christians. The theological dialogues are preparatory for this final fellowship in the body and blood of our Saviour Christ in the sense that we attempt to come to a consensus on the essential common elements of the apostolic faith and witness on the basis of our common study, reflection and interpretation of the Holy Scripture and Tradition in different cultural contexts, and historical circumstances in the life of the Church. Our hope that the Holy Spirit, as promised by Christ, will lead us into all the truth, undergirds our human efforts to discern the elements that unite us.

2. In the recent Roman Catholic emphasis on *Communio* ecclesiology, it seems to the Orthodox Churches, there is greater emphasis on the principle of unity in the sacramental sharing of the eucharist and the identity of the local Churches. However, the Orthodox cannot see how the Roman principle of *Communion with the Bishop of Rome* as *sine qua non* condition of communion applies to the Orthodox Churches in the Orthodox understanding of unity, the simultaneous communion of the faithful with their bishops and bishops with each other is constitutive of the oneness of the Body of

Christ. Communion with any particular bishop is not privileged over against others as the ineluctable condition. There could certainly be a canonical order of primacies or pre-eminences, for example, the Patriarchates of Rome, Constantinople, Alexandria and Antioch, that evolved from historical and political circumstances of the Roman/Byzantine empire. Local churches, when they come together, may probably come to mutual understanding and agreements on the meaning and ecumenical relevance of such primacies. But such protocols and historical considerations are to be distinguished from the theological principle of the communion of the whole Body of Christ.

3. It seems to the Orthodox that the Roman Catholic Church continues to perceive the dialogue with the Eastern and Oriental Orthodox Churches in terms of the Uniatist or Eastern/Oriental Catholic Churches created by the Roman Church mainly since the colonial times. It appears that the concept of the "reunion with Rome" of members of the Eastern Churches became the paradigm for the Roman Church's dialogue with the Orthodox Churches. Very few Roman Catholics could really see that the Orthodox Churches represent originally non-western communities holding apostolic Christian tradition with no privileged connection or obedience to Rome. These Eastern Churches consider uniatism as a grave anomaly perpetrated by the Local Church of the West. The Uniatist Churches created and sustained by the enormous financial, political, diplomatic, and imperial power of Western nations like Portugal and France, divided the ancient Orthodox Churches and aggravated the old historical and theological tensions between the Church of Rome and Churches of the East. Therefore the goal of a dialogue implicitly conceived on the model or in terms of "uniatism" of the "Oriental Catholic Churches" is likely to repel the Orthodox Churches further, since such a goal does not recognize the identity and authenticity of the local apostolic Churches of the East.

4. There are Roman Catholic circles which advance a quantitative argument in favour of "reunion with Rome". This is a simplistic argument that the universal Roman Catholic Church is spread all over the earth, is mighty in its institutional power and comprises a

population that far exceeds the number of faithful of all Orthodox Churches put together.

The Orthodox Churches, on the other hand, are scattered, often suffering from internal dissensions, living in the Islamic and other non-Christian contexts, vulnerable to political and ideological pressure as has happened in the former Soviet Union and so on.

The quantitative claims of the Roman Catholic Church are factually true, and the situation of several Orthodox Churches is far from desirable from a worldly perspective of human institutions. However, in a theological dialogue, the Orthodox Churches are least likely to concede such arguments from geographical universality or numerical quantity or institutional bargaining power.

5. The dialogues so far, both official and unofficial, bilateral and multilateral, seem to suggest that we need a genuine paradigm shift in order to surmount the ecclesiological impasses created by the position of Rome vis-à-vis the Orthodox Churches. It is to be noticed that the Oriental Catholic Churches are becoming increasingly aware of their roots in the eastern Christian tradition that has nothing to do with Rome. They have begun to affirm their identity as autonomous "individual" Churches or *sui juris* Churches with their own local synod and local heads of Churches. They have also started to revive apostolic claims like for example the Thomas tradition, until recently ignored or underestimated under Latin colonial influence. This trend is likely to gain momentum, especially if the Roman Catholic West ceases to provide substantial economic and institutional patronage to these churches as in the past. In reality, these oriental Churches now make huge efforts to return to the ancient 'local church' ecclesiology kept intact by the Orthodox Churches. However, the Oriental catholic Churches still belong to the old universalist, imperial paradigm provided by the Roman Church. It is unlikely to have a paradigm shift as long as the West continues to maintain its economic, cultural and political hegemony and power equations.

## Conclusion

Reading the signs of the times one could envisage a radical geopolitical, and cultural and religious re-ordering of the world occurring



in this century. With the revival of fundamentalist religious forces, the decline and secularization of Western Christianity, the emergence of India and China as major international players, the significant demographic changes due to massive immigrant populations in rich Western countries, our set ecumenical agenda and the nature of our dialogues might experience dramatic shifts. This is, however, an imaginary scenario for us now. Our task as Christians requires that we regain our common ground and intimate bonding in Christ by critically taking up and reflecting on such themes as *authority and collegiality in the Church, local Church ecclesiology and global Church structures, primacy and jurisdiction, unity and diversity, universality and catholicity, gospel preaching and self emptying institutions and so on.*

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## Book Reviews

**Michael Walsh**, *THE CONCLAVE*, Canterbury Press, Norwich, 2003, pp.180

Michael Walsh is the editor of *The Dictionary of Christian Biography*. He was also for many years a columnist on the renowned weekly, *The Tablet* and Librarian of Heythrop College. So he has a suitable background to engage in a study which gives an almost blow by blow account of all the Conclaves in the Church's 2000 year history. He has condensed his work within 180 pages, which includes an Appendix detailing the date of election, installation, death or abdication/removal of all the popes, where these are known with some certainty.<sup>1</sup> As one moves from one conclave to another the reader experiences surprise, scandal, curiosity, satisfaction or tedium, depending on the situation of the conclaves described. The matter gathered here has meant much work, sifting through many important books of Church history, which are listed in his Bibliography. However, Pastor's *History of the Popes* is missing from his list. Since the book is limited to conclaves, it does not tell us the great good which many popes did.

The opening paragraph of the very first chapter warns one about what to expect: "Many papal elections involved violence, chicanery and corruption on a grand scale. Blood ran in the streets of Rome, gold changed hands in the corridors of power, rival factions pumped out propaganda and ambitious men caballed around the deathbeds of the popes." The majority of conclaves seem to have involved "high passions and low intrigues". All this was a far cry from the Gospel

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1 The *Annuario Pontificio* (Vatican, 2004, pp 8-15) lists about ten popes who resigned or were deposed.

(‘it will not be so among you’: Mt 20.26) and leaves one wondering what room was left in all this for the Holy Spirit? One sees how the selection or ‘election’ of popes evolved over the years. At first it was a very local affair in which the populace and clergy of Rome elected their bishop. (Election by cardinals came at a later stage). Soon one observes how influential, aristocratic, rival families of Rome and Italy (Colonna, Medici, Pamphili, Borghese, Farnese, etc.) began to control the Roman elections. This resulted in the bishops of Rome being of aristocratic birth. Hence the election of Leo III in 795 was untypical of the period, since he was not of aristocratic birth. Leo crowned Charlemagne ‘the Holy Roman Emperor’, who thenceforth with his successors, was to play a part in papal elections for a thousand years to come. The election of the bishop of Rome was becoming a European affair. Thus, gradually powerful European kings (of France, Germany, Spain, Austro-Hungary) also intervened, to the extent of vetoing candidates who they felt might act against their interests.<sup>2</sup> This continued into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when Emperor Franz Joseph of the Austro-Hungarian Empire vetoed the candidature of Cardinal Rampolla, with the result that Cardinal Giuseppe Sarto (Pius X) was elected pope in 1903. Another reason for delays in papal elections was because successive popes, until 731, thought it necessary to seek the approval of the Emperor in Constantinople. The following popes (936-955): Leo VII, Stephen VIII, Marinus II and Agapitus II were all appointees of Alberic of Spoleto, a Roman hero, who assumed the title “Prince of Rome”. A large number of popes resided for prolonged periods outside Rome or Italy. Some popes were elected with certain pre-conditions or ‘capitulations’, which they sometimes later ignored.

At one time there were three claimants to the Roman See: Ursinus, Liberius and Damasus. This led to riots in the streets of Rome in 366, which left 137 dead: “Never before, or indeed ever since, had there

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2 How powerful the European powers were may be gauged from the fact that Elizabeth, wife of Philip V king of Spain, appointed her 9-year old son archbishop of Toledo, while the pope was helpless. P.C. Thomas, *A Compact History of the Popes*, St Paul’s, Bombay, 1994, p 158.

been quite so much death and destruction surrounding the election of a pope" (p 18). Finally Damasus succeeded Liberius as bishop of Rome. The year 498 saw two claimants to the papacy: the deacon Symmachus (a convert from paganism) and the Archpriest Lawrence. Once again there were riots between their supporters, which resulted in the deaths of many Christians in 502. Already we see here an anticipation of what has come to be known as the Great Western Schism (1378-1417), when there were even three claimants to the papal throne and two of them excommunicated each other ! Symmachus had become pope in 498 and made personal nomination by the dying pope the preferred method of papal succession, but this did not meet with the approval of the Roman senate. There existed a decree in 483, which was later repealed, that popes could not dispose of papal property. The reason for the decree was probably because paying off those whose support had been bought, regularly bankrupted the papal treasury (25). The election of Boniface III (607) took almost a year: which suggests that it was controversial. He held a synod in which the ban on canvassing –and the offering of bribes- was re-enacted.

Chapter 3 covering roughly the period from the middle of the 8<sup>th</sup> to the middle of the 10<sup>th</sup> century is entitled, "Descent into Chaos". When Leo III (795-816) discovered plots against his life, "he personally sat in judgement over those accused; it was recorded that some 300 people were executed" (p 40). When Paschal I (817-824) suspected two of the highest officials of his entourage of conniving with co-Emperor Lothair to put limits to his sovereignty, he had them blinded and beheaded (41). Then there was the macabre event connected with Stephen VI (896-897). He was the son of a Roman priest and had been made bishop of Anagni by pope Formosus (891-896). Nevertheless he was a bitter foe of his predecessor. In 897 Stephen called a Synod in Rome, had the body of Formosus exhumed, dressed in pontifical vestments, placed on a throne before the assembly and accused of various crimes. He was found guilty and the sacraments he had bestowed invalid: "The corpse was now stripped of its vestments, two fingers from the hand with which the late pope had given blessings were cut off, and his body thrown into



the River Tiber" (48). These events raised the ire of the Roman mob, so that Stephen was imprisoned and shortly afterwards strangled. Among the women who played a role in the papal intrigues we must count Marozia, wife of Alberic of Spoleto. She managed to get her son, John XI (931-936) elected pope, although he was only in his twenties.

Likewise John XII was in his twenties when he was elected bishop of Rome in 955. It is recorded of him, that "one day he ordained all his flatterers who were with him at table as priests. When he was not with his women he spent his time in the forests around Rome, hunting" (Thomas: 71). With the full backing of Otto, Emperor of Germany, he was hauled before a synod and deposed for apostasy, abandoning his see and immorality. He ended by being murdered in 964 by the husband of his mistress, to whose house he was making his way at night. The same synod elected Leo VIII as his successor. This irked the Romans who had a learned deacon, Benedict V elected pope. But Emperor Otto got a synod in the Lateran to depose him and reduce him to the rank of deacon. Pope Leo VIII himself broke the papal staff of office over (Pope) Benedict's head, as he lay in submission on the floor of the basilica (p 56).

In 882 Marinus I became the first *bishop* to be elected pope. Gregory X too was elected pope while still a layman; he was ordained priest in 1272, after his election. Hadrian V, elected in 1276, died before he could be ordained a priest. Benedict XIII was a cardinal deacon when elected pope in 1394 and was ordained a priest five days after his election. Earlier, John XIX, who succeeded his brother Benedict VIII as pope in 1024, being still a layman was ordained bishop in a single day ! Their nephew Benedict IX was also still a layman 20 years old when elected pope in 1032. He wallowed in debauchery and drunkenness. The angry Romans drove him out of the city and elected a priest, Sylvester III to be pope. But by an act of simony Benedict IX sold the papacy to his godfather, who took the name Gregory VI. There were soon three claimants to the papacy. Incidentally, the priest Mercurius was the first bishop of Rome to change his name upon his election in 533; he took the name "John II". The fact that his original name was Mercurius, after the god

Mercury, shows that Christians were not averse to bearing their original names, even if these were of pagan gods. Nicholas II (1059) was the first pope to have himself crowned.

Chapter V outlines the development of the conclave comprised of cardinal bishops, which is the present mode of election of the bishop of Rome. Nicholas III (1277-1280) was elected by a conclave of only six cardinals. It took 27 months to elect John XXII in 1316. The candidacy of Sixtus IV (1471-1484) was supported by generous payments to several cardinal electors. As soon as Innocent VIII (1484-1492) became pope he arranged suitable marriages for his illegitimate children, fathered in his youth. But his successor, Alexander VI (1492-1503), continued his illegitimate liaisons into his pontificate. Having fathered six children before his election, he had two more afterwards. He carried on his affair with Giulia Farnese, who was already married, into the early years of his pontificate; she was the sister of the future Paul III. Meanwhile in Florence the ascetic monk Savonarola wanted Alexander VI deposed. He thundered from the cathedral pulpit: "This Alexander ... climbed to the Chair of Peter with bribes and murder. He sits upon the laps of prostitutes. He sells Church benefices to the highest bidder to pay his partners in flesh. He is not even a Christian, much less a Pope. He is the devil spoken of in the scriptures" (Thomas: 134). Alexander excommunicated him and he was finally burnt at the stake. The way was being prepared for the arrival of Martin Luther and other Reformers. Of Alexander's successor, Julius II (1503-1513), Walsh says: "He bribed his way to the papacy and then cynically ensured that the fifth council of the Lateran, which met between 1511 and 1517, forbade simony, especially the buying of votes in a conclave" (p 112). Julius' successor, Leo X (1513-1521) became a cardinal at the age of 13, a deacon at 20 and was elected pope at 38, while still a deacon. He authorised the selling of indulgences, especially to finance the building of St Peter's Basilica. But he himself held frequent banquets and parties. He made 31 men cardinals, six of them his relatives; the former had to pay 3000 ducats as the price for this favour. When Leo discovered that his own physician and a cardinal were plotting to poison him, he had them hanged in public in Rome. By 1517 Martin Luther had nailed his famous 95 theses to the

door of the Church in Wittenberg; he narrowly escaped meeting the same fate as Savanarola, thanks to the protection of the ruler of Saxony.

Paul III (1534-1549) created his two grandsons cardinals when they were only 14 and 16 years old. Nevertheless, he contributed to the reform of the Church by convoking the General Council of Trent. The 79 year old Clement XII (1730-1740) was nearly blind when elected pope in 1730; two years later he went completely blind. He was frequently bedridden and, according to Walsh, lost his memory in 1736. In fact he was entirely bedridden during the last two years of his pontificate. Pius VI was elected in 1775 after a conclave of 134 days, partly because he had given secret undertakings to the anti-Jesuit group, that he would not mitigate the decree of his immediate predecessor, Clement XIV, suppressing the Society of Jesus. But once elected, he did not fully comply with this promise. Pius "was a rather worldly man who revived papal nepotism on a grand scale" (138). Amidst the poverty of ordinary Romans, he built magnificent palaces for two of his nephews and made one of them a cardinal.

The last chapter entitled "Modern Times" ends with the 3-day conclave which elected John Paul II in 1978. Initially there were two highly probable 'papabiles': cardinal Benelli, archbishop of Florence, who had been Secretary of State for many years; and cardinal Siri, archbishop of Genoa. The latter was favoured by the conservative curial cardinals, but he queered the pitch for his candidature by a newspaper interview, in which he said that he would roll back the reforms of Vatican II: ironically this is precisely what seems to have been happening since the election of John Paul II. On the other hand, Benelli was not much liked on account of his tough ways in the Vatican. So the conservatives and some others switched to Karol Wojtyla, archbishop of Cracow, who was elected on the eighth ballot.

Since the conclave which elected Pius IX, conclaves have lasted only a few days at the most, thanks to the exclusion of family interests or the intervention of the great powers. The rules governing conclaves have constantly been evolving in history. In 1996 John Paul II issued an Apostolic Constitution "Universi Dominici Gregis" on the conduct of the papal conclave. Among other things, it warns "against simony

in papal elections, conspiring for a new pope in the lifetime of the incumbent, any form of 'capitulation', or any attempt to introduce a veto" (163). That is an acknowledgment of the evils which have dominated many papal conclaves in history and which Walsh has sufficiently described in the present book. It is also a warning that history could repeat itself!

But I cannot agree with the view of Walsh expressed in his "Afterword", that it is not preferable to have a pope from a 'third-world' country. Basing himself on the fact that the pope is bishop of Rome, he goes on: "The further a pope's ethnic origins are from the city of Rome, the more remote he appears from the bishopric of Rome" (166). In fact, many popes have not been Romans or even Italians; several spent some years of their pontificate outside Rome or even Italy. A number of popes were Greeks, Victor I (189-199) was a native of Africa and Anicetus (155-166) came from Syria. The pope is not only bishop of Rome, but also pastor of the universal Church. And now with the centre of gravity of the Church having already shifted to the southern hemisphere (see Bühlmann's *The Coming of the Third Church*, 1976), the idea of a pope from here should not be frowned upon, to say the least. The pope's own Curia began to be internationalized after Vatican II.

### Concluding remarks

We know the dictum, that "history is a great teacher" and those who ignore it are condemned to repeat it. What has been once could happen again. The fact that conclaves are now better regulated than before and that the popes of modern times have exemplified good character, should not lull us into complacency. Happily we have moved away from the veneration of the pope which bordered on blasphemy and was particularly marked in the period between the two Vatican Councils. We have *La Civiltà Cattolica* writing: "When the pope meditates, it is God who thinks in him". Some spoke of a real presence of Christ under the pontifical species or of the 'vice-God of mankind'.<sup>3</sup>

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3 . Tillard, *The Bishop of Rome*, 1983, pp 23-24



Nevertheless there persists a tendency to develop a sort of cult of the pope, beyond respect for him, and that is to be eschewed.

We must remember that the supreme governing body in the Church is neither the College of Cardinals nor the Roman Curia, but the universal episcopate (inclusive of its head which it elects). Hence even after the death of a pope, the college of bishops remains head of the universal Church, so that it never lacks a visible head. Between the death of Marcellinus in 304 and the election of his successor Marcellus, there intervened a gap of four years ! There have been lesser, though pretty large gaps in subsequent church history. John Paul II's Apostolic Constitution on the conclave, lays down that a period of 15 days, which may be extended to 20 days, must elapse between the death of a pope and the start of the conclave to elect his successor. Still, it is not normal or in keeping with the constitution of the church, that the college of bishops remain long without electing a head, who must "strengthen" his brothers (Lk 22.32).

But the head cannot exist apart from the body which must exercise a continual pastoral solicitude and vigilance for the head. This is the lesson of history. The College of bishops possesses the necessary authority for this purpose. Because of this solicitude, it was only a General Council of the Church which was able to resolve the Great Western Schism. This Council of Constance stated with great emphasis, in its Decree "Haec Sancta" (1415), which is never quoted in papal documents: "First of all it declares that, having assembled legitimately in the Holy Spirit, and being a general Council and representing the Catholic Church militant, it has its power immediately from Christ, which every state and dignity, even if it be the papal dignity, must obey in what concerns faith, the eradication of the mentioned schism and the reformation of the said Church in head and members" (Dupuis [ed.], *The Christian Faith*, 1999, N. 806). This Decree should be viewed in the context of the grave crisis or 'limit' situation then obtaining in the Church. The principles on which this Decree is based are reaffirmed in the Collective Declaration by the German hierarchy (1875) five years after the Declaration of Papal Primacy by Vatican I. The German bishops avowed: "It is in virtue of the same divine institution upon which the papacy rests that the

episcopate also exists. It, too, has its rights and duties, because of the ordinance of God himself, and *the Pope has neither the right nor the power to change them* ... the bishops are not mere tools of the Pope, nor papal officials without responsibility of their own ..." (Ibid., N. 841; emphasis added). The very next month Pius IX gave solemn approval to this Declaration, stating: "Your declaration gives the genuine Catholic doctrine, which is also that of the holy Council and of this holy See; it defends it with illuminating and irrefutable reasoning ..." (Ibid.). Thus the Church does have a divinely instituted, collegial structure for its continuance. Cardinal St Robert Bellarmine (d. 1621), Doctor of the Church, who came close to being elected pope in two conclaves, taught that one may resist a pope who seeks to destroy the Church: "The Church would be in a sorry state if she had to recognize an openly raging 'wolf' as 'shepherd'", he said.<sup>4</sup>

Apart from a situation of schism like that referred to above, the college of bishops would have to intervene in the following cases: 1) If a pope were found to be suffering from serious mental illness, e.g. schizophrenia or Alzheimer's disease; 2) if a pope became a heretic: at least two bishops of Rome have been condemned as heretics by Ecumenical Councils in the past. Canon Law has fought shy of formulating any rules governing such situations. It might be better to formulate such laws before a crisis situation actually arises, so as to avoid a damaging delay in the application of a solution.

For practical purposes, the college of bishops could accept that its head be elected by a Synod of bishops or a gathering of cardinals. Here a question is sometimes raised: since the pope appoints the cardinals, could he not thereby pre-determine to some extent, that the conclave elect as his successor someone in his own image and likeness? There is much substance in this objection, notwithstanding the exceptional case of John XXIII. Pius XII had appointed all but 11 of the 51 cardinals who elected him, yet the rotund John turned out to have little resemblance to the severe looking and ascetic Pius (Walsh: 165). The question could be raised whether the cardinals should not

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4 Quoted in H. Küng, *Structures of the Church* (1965), p 343

be selected by the national or continental bishops' conferences ? This would ensure that "*fullness in unity*" and "*united variety*" (LG 13, 23; emphasis added) which constitutes the catholicity of the Church. We might then expect that the choice of the head would be more expressive of the universal body of bishops. Unity must not be confused with uniformity.

All in all the book of Michael Walsh is a thought provoking one and a handy guide to the history of papal conclaves.

**Julian Saldanha**



**George Thadathil**, *Vision from the Margin, A Study of Sri Narayana Guru Movement in the Literature of Nitya Chaitanya Yati*, Bangalore: Asian Trading Corporation, 2007, Pages 257+xxiii; Price Rs.275/-.

Nitya Chaitanya Yati has come to be a household name in the state of Kerala and even beyond. As a prolific writer both in Malayalam and English he touched upon diverse topics of human concern, and helped to illumine the moral conscience of the people. His simple and lucid style endeared him to the common man and woman, while building on the philosophical insights of Sri Narayana Guru, who initiated a socio-religious reform movement in the Izhava community in the early phase of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. That his literary output crossed ninety books and a few hundred articles in a span of four decades speaks for itself. It is surprising that this versatile personality has not been sufficiently examined by the academic world till recently. The present book, *Vision from the Margin*, by George Thadathil, is a timely contribution to fill the void.

The book is born out of the doctoral dissertation by the author submitted at the University of Madras. The purpose of the book, in the words of the author, is “to establish two points: first that there was an underlying ideology and vision operative in the movement, and second, that the vision contained in the literature of Nitya is furthering the cause/ideology/vision of the movement”(146). The three major streams of the Sri Narayana Guru Movement are listed as: SNDP *Yogam*, *Narayana Gurukula*, and SNDP *Sangham*. The book restricts its inquiry to the Gurukula part of the movement, and further restricts it to Nitya Chaitanya Yati, placing him in the Guru *parampara* after Nataraja Guru. The assumption is that although the Gurukula Foundation remained only a faction of the Sri Narayana Movement, “it has succeeded to comprehensively preserve and promote the vision of the Narayana Movement for contemporary times”(147). Even



though the author states that the study is primarily text-based, he has enriched it with much field data gathered skilfully through interviews and visits to various *Gurukulas*.

The book has four chapters besides the introduction and the conclusion. Chapter one, *The Izhavas and their Ascent to Power*, takes us through a historical-cultural tour of the Izhava community, throwing much light on the century-long struggle of this once despised community for a legitimate space socially, culturally and politically. Sri Narayana Guru, the prime mover of the movement, was ably assisted by visionaries like Dr. Palpu, Kumaran Asan, T.K.Madhavan, C. Kesavan and Sahodaran Ayyappan. Chapter two, *The Emergence of Nitya Chaitanya Yati*, gives us a kaleidoscopic picture of the personality of Nitya emphasising his rootedness in the Guru tradition. The author classifies Nitya's vast pool of literature into four broad categories: autobiographical, religio-aesthetic, socio-cultural or educational, and psycho-philosophical. The East-West University was a dream project that Nitya tried to set up at Varkala. Continuing with the *Vision of Nitya Chaitanya Yati* chapter three discusses his vision under four broad titles building on the metaphor of a tree: socio-political roots, psycho-spiritual stem, pedagogic and religio-aesthetic foliage, and the flowering of *advaitic* intuition. Narayana Guru's *advaita* is projected as the zenith of his vision offering a basis for an egalitarian arrangement of social life aimed at promoting a New World Order based on "social and economic justice and equality and peace"(132). Nitya consciously tries to deny any patent to Brahminic orthodoxy as the heirs of *advaita*, and justifies the use of this concept to counter casteism and its hegemony. "The vision of Nitya is a continuation of the vision of Sri Narayana Guru, and that in and through his reinterpretation of the vision he achieved for the community(depressed classes) an emancipatory path", writes the author(163). In chapter four the book tries to draw *The Implications of Nitya's Vision*.

The author tries to explain Narayana Guru's *advaita* or non-dualism as 'cosmotheandrist', a concept borrowed from Raymondo Panikkar. "Narayana Guru tradition offers a new ethic, a new vision to build society on firm footing, on equality inherent in

cosmotheandrist", says the book(139). Earlier Nitya is portrayed as delving "*advaitic* intuition to unearth and develop the cosmotheandrist lurking therein"(138) The texts referred to do not indicate any such cosmotheandrist lurking in his writings. Nor am I convinced of the propriety of this alien concept in explaining the vision of the Narayana Guru tradition.

The passion and thoroughness with which the author approaches the topic, especially in the earlier chapters, is praiseworthy. Logic and cohesion, however, seems to be lacking in chapter 4. A reader may easily get confused if the book is on Narayana Guru Movement or on Nitya Chaithanya Yati. The inadequacy of an alien language (English) in exploring the vast pool of Nitya's writings which are mostly in Malayalam may be excused, but some refining of the language is desirable in order to avoid ambiguities and nonclarity. Wrongly placed punctuation marks occasionally add to the confusion. Consistency in the use of proper names like Keralam/Kerala is also desirable. The book, however, remains a valuable contribution and a 'must read' not only to the students of Sri Narayana Guru tradition but also to all interested in emancipatory movements anywhere.

**P.T.Mathew**